THREE-TIME NEWBERY HONOR RECIPIENT
CHRISTINA SOONTORNVAT
LEGENDS OF
LOTUS ISLAND
CITY OF WISHES
ILLUSTRATED BY KEVIN HONG

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BY CHRISTINA SOONTORNVAT

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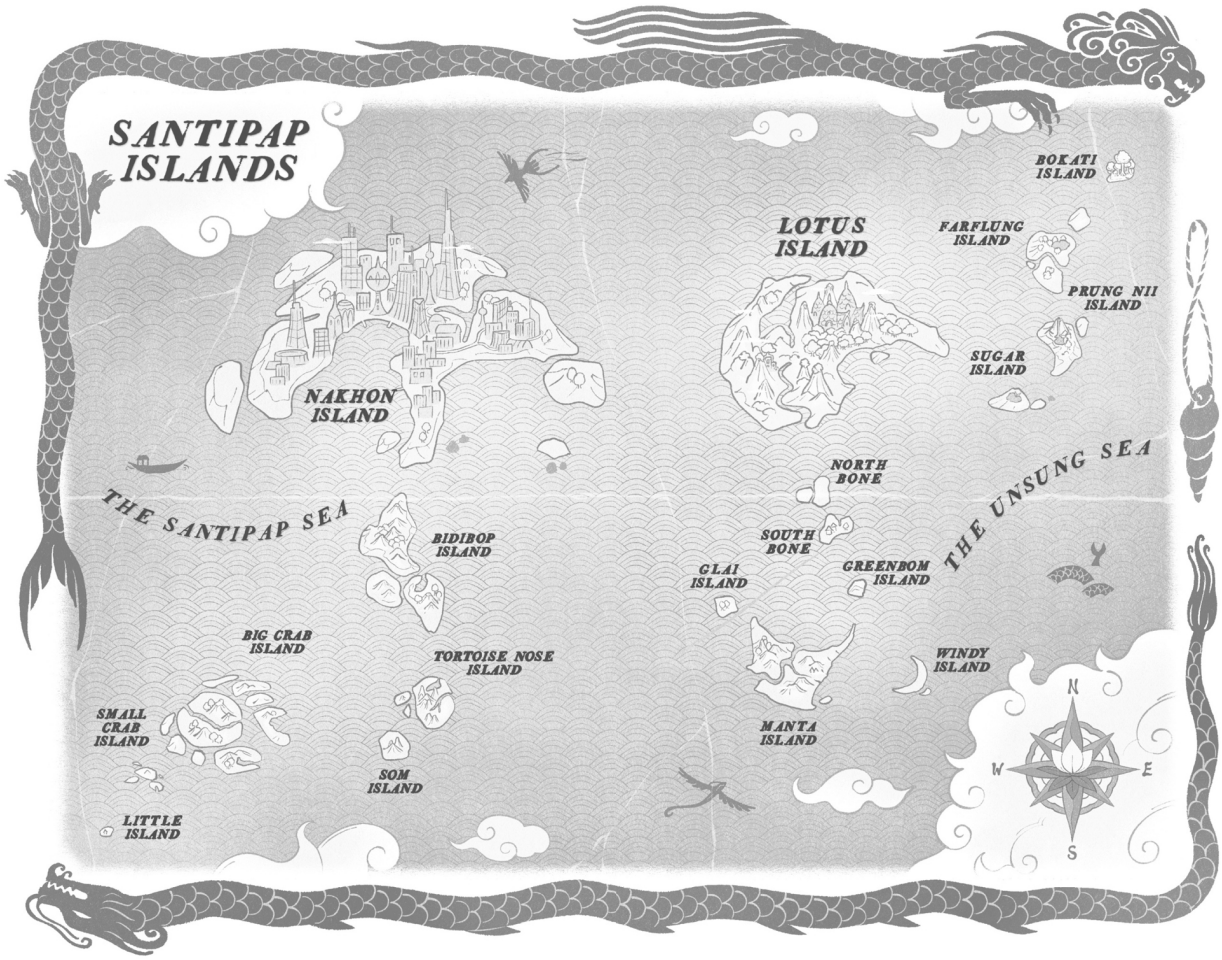
For my cowriter, Aven


SANTIPAP ISLANDS
NAKHON ISLAND
THE SANTIPAP SEA
BIDIBOP ISLAND
BIG CRAB ISLAND
TORTOISE NOSE ISLAND
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SOM ISLAND
LITTLE ISLAND
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BOKATI ISLAND
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SOUTH BONE
GLAI ISLAND
GREENBOM ISLAND
THE UNSUNG SEA
WINDY ISLAND
MANTA ISLAND
N
W
E
S

Contents

Title Page
Dedication
Map
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18

Chapter 19
Sneak Peek
About the Author
Copyright

You would think that when you've transformed into a magical creature hundreds of times, it would start to feel ordinary.

But whenever I changed into my Guardian form, I got the same thrill as the very first time.

Our entire class of Novice Guardians was assembled on the lawn near the Lotus Court on Lotus Island. Master Dew, our defense teacher, stood on the grass in front of us in her Guardian form: an inky black jaicat with short golden horns.

"All right, Novices," she said with a swish of her tail. "Into your Guardian forms, please."

I waited for my friends to transform first. With a ripple of fur, Mikko became a huge field sloth with curving claws and a stout tail. Hetty transformed into an indigo hare with long, twitching ears. Sam turned into

a gray wolfhund, and Salan swooped out his blue wybird wings. And my best friend, Cherry, became a big gillybear with cream-colored fur and webbed paws. Soon, our whole class had become a feathered, furred, magical group of Novice Guardians.

My turn. I bent down to touch the ground at my feet. Instantly my fingers and toes fused into hooves. I raised my head and stretched my long neck. I had become a roan: a large deer with ruby red antlers.

"Perfect, everyone," said Master Dew. "Now, Plum, if you please."

I nodded. When I first arrived at the Guardian Academy on Lotus Island, I had felt sure that I didn't fit in, as though I wasn't like any of the other kids. And it was true—I wasn't like them.

Every Guardian had powers that fell into one of three categories: Hand Guardians were physically powerful, Breath Guardians had powers of the senses, and Heart Guardians had powers of healing.

As for me? I made up a category of one.

I couldn't do anything that the other Novices could do, but at least I did have one special talent.

My classmates held out their wings or paws or claws as I went down the line. One by one, they touched my hoof or my shoulder. We shut our eyes and I focused on our connection to each other. My antlers tingled, like they were charged with electricity. I felt energy pulse between us. When I was finished, I had made each Novice's power stronger than it had been before.

Salan, who healed the sick and injured, could heal them even faster. Sam's keen senses of smell and hearing grew even sharper. Hetty, who could sense danger, could detect any threat long before it arrived. And Mikko had even more endurance than before.

"Psst, Plum," Cherry whispered when it was her turn. "Make me *enormous*, okay? Like, as big as a house! Master Dew is going to have me spar with Mikko, and I want to win this time."

Whenever I boosted Cherry's powers, she became bigger, stronger, and more agile.

“I can’t make you as big as a *house,*” I whispered back. “That’s impossible. Besides, that wouldn’t be fair to Mikko.”

Cherry muttered under her breath, “Fair, shmair.”

I focused on the connection between us and took a deep breath. I had only been doing this “boosting” thing for a couple of months, but I was already much better at it than before. I learned how to do it during our field study with wise old Master Em on Bokati Island. At that time, it would make me so tired to boost the powers of just one Novice. But now I could work with all the students in our class without breaking a sweat.

“Excellent,” said Master Dew as soon as I had finished. “Now, find your sparring partners and spread out. Let’s get started.”

I was paired up with Bon, a boy from Bidibop Island whose Guardian form was a spring elk. He was a Breath Guardian with the power to know if someone was telling the truth. I liked Bon. He was nice.

And today, I was going to beat him real bad.

Bon and I squared off in front of each other. We stomped our hooves. We each trotted backward about ten yards, then bowed. And then we rushed at each other, full speed.

I lowered my head just before impact. *Wham!* Our skulls smacked against each other. If I had been in my human form, I would have been knocked unconscious! But as a roan, I was hardheaded—in more ways than one.

I was determined to win this match. I widened my stance, locking my antlers into Bon's.

The last time I had sparred with him, I had to tap out. In fact, the best I had ever done against Bon was to end in a draw. But not today.

We grunted as we struggled and our antlers clacked against each other. I could feel myself gaining the advantage. I broke into a smile. Here it was—my moment. I just had to get my shoulder in the right position and I could wrench him off his feet with one strong twist.

I held my breath and twisted with all my might. But somehow in the last few minutes, I had let my stance get too narrow. My front legs were too close to each other, and my back leg wasn't touching the ground. I realized too late that I was off-balance.

Bon got his weight under him and twisted *me*.

Bam! I slammed, shoulder first, onto the ground, the rest of my body flipping over until I was flat on my back. I quickly transformed into my human form and whacked my hand on the ground.

"Tap!" I said weakly.

Bon transformed too and helped me to my feet. "I'm sorry, Plum! Are you okay?"

I rubbed my shoulder. "It's okay, Bon, I'm fine." Nothing was really hurt—except my self-esteem.

"All right, Novices," Master Dew called out as the rest of the class finished sparring. "That's it for today! Great job, everyone, and we'll

resume your lessons in the New Year. Don't forget to practice your drills over the break!"

She came over to me and put her hand on my back. "You're all right, Plum?"

"Yes, but I was so close to winning!" I sighed. "I really wanted to beat Bon just once."

"That was your problem," said Master Dew. "I was watching you. You wanted to win so badly that you forgot all your foundations and you lost your balance. You were holding your breath and not paying attention to your opponent."

"I guess you're right," I grumbled.

She patted my shoulder. "Don't be hard on yourself. We'll work on all that after New Year's."

I bowed to her and caught up with Cherry and Hetty, who were skipping back toward our dorm room.

"Don't be sad, Plum," said Cherry. "I lost my match to Mikko too. It happens."

"Yes, how can you be sad when we are officially on break?" said Hetty. "New Year's holiday! I am so excited!"

I linked arms with them. "Okay, you're right. I'm over it, and I'm officially excited too!"

"New Year's is my favorite," said Cherry. "The parties, the fireworks! And the food! I am going to stuff my face with so many lantern dumplings, I'm going to literally transform into a dumpling."

"Finally our first holiday break since we got here," said Hetty. "My mom and big sister are taking me shopping right away! How about you, Plum? What's your favorite New Year's tradition?"

"Well, it's just me, Grandma, and Grandpa on our Little Island. Grandma makes pumpkin-coconut soup. Grandpa plays a song on his guitar and our velvet goat, Tansy, dances around. And then we watch the twile-flies zip in and out of the lantern trees."

"And make a wish?" said Hetty.

I smiled. “Oh, of course, making a wish at New Year’s is the best part.”

I reached up to my collar and squeezed the shell pendant that hung on a string around my neck. When I was a baby, my mother had made it and whispered her wish for me into the shell. I was certain that she had wished for me to become a Guardian. If I continued to do well for the rest of the year on Lotus Island, I would graduate from the Guardian Academy and her wish would come true.

“It’s so funny to think that this time last year, I had no idea that I’d be here on Lotus Island with all of you,” I said. “Last New Year, I think I wished for a wheelbarrow.”

We all laughed.

“I can’t believe you two are going to Sam’s house for New Year’s,” said Hetty. “I’m super jealous! But also super glad because it means I’ll get to see you.”

Cherry and I were the only Novices not going home for the holidays. The boat tickets would be very expensive for us. But Sam’s mother, Lady Ubon, had invited us to spend the New Year with them at their manor house on Nakhon Island. Our closest friends, Hetty, Salan, and Mikko lived there too, so we’d get to see them all over the break.

“I am *so* curious about what Sam’s house looks like,” said Hetty, holding the door to our dorm building open. “It must be a castle.”

Cherry skipped up the stairs to our room. She was excited as usual, but I was nervous. I had no idea what to expect at Sam’s house, but I was certain that I didn’t have the proper clothes for the trip. I picked up my shoes from their spot near our bedroom door. They were now a full two sizes too small. My heels stuck out the back.

“Luckily Grandma sent me some money to get new shoes on Nakhon Island,” I said.

“Oh, there are so many shops there,” said Hetty. “You’ll be able to find whatever you need—and about a thousand things you didn’t know you wanted until you saw them.”

Cherry waved a paper in front of me. “Don’t forget your permission form. Master Sunback has to sign it and you have to give it to the boat driver so he knows to let you off in Nakhon Harbor.”

I gasped. “Cherry, what would I do without you!” I grabbed the unsigned paper from my bag and rushed out the door to find Master Sunback.

“You know how to repay me, right?” Cherry called after me. “Next time, big as a *house*!”

I could feel it all around me: The New Year was just around the corner. The air was cooler and drier. And the sun had been coming up a little later and later each day.

But the best way to tell that the New Year was coming was the lantern trees.

I ducked beneath the twisting branches of the lantern trees that lined the path leading to Master Sunback's cottage. Each branch was covered in tiny pink and orange buds.

In just another week or so, the flower petals would unfurl, and the tree would erupt with thousands of papery flowers that looked like tiny lanterns. The twile-flies would flit inside to pollinate the flowers, making the whole tree blink and glow.

Master Sunback lived in a small cottage on a hill overlooking the kitchen gardens. As I walked up the little path to her cottage, I looked down at the garden rows where I did my chores. The rainbow kale and custard greens grew thick between the fat cabbages. I smiled, feeling proud of my hard work.

“I’ll be back soon!” I called to the vegetables. “Don’t let the sugar beans get ripe without me!”

I peeked my head in the open doorway to the cottage. “Master Sunback?”

Inside, there was a simple bed on the floor in the corner. The back door was open onto a wooden deck. Master Sunback sat on the deck soaking up the sun in her Guardian form—a bearded dragon with a long tail and gold-orange scales.

“Ah, Plum!” said Master Sunback, transforming back into her human self and motioning me to join her on the deck.

“I’m sorry to disturb you,” I said with a bow. “But could you please sign this permission form so that I can get on the boat tomorrow morning?”

She nodded and took the form from me. “Are you excited about going to Nakhon Island with your friends?”

“Oh, I’m very excited! And, well … maybe a little nervous. I’ve never been to a big city before. My mother was from Nakhon Island,” I added quietly. “I wrote to my grandparents to ask if I had any other family there, but they said they didn’t know much about my mother’s life before she met my father. They didn’t even know her last name.”

“Even so, I’m sure you will feel a connection to her when you visit,” said Master Sunback kindly. “When you return, you’ll have to tell me what it’s like.”

“You’ve never been there before?”

Master Sunback shook her head. “The Guardians have served on every island in the Santipap Archipelago except for Nakhon Island.” She gave me a wink. “The people of Nakhon like to do things their own way. But I expect that will change next year when Sam Ubon graduates from our Academy. Lady Ubon has always claimed that they don’t need Guardians on Nakhon. But I’m sure she will feel differently when it’s a member of her own family.”

I glanced at our headmaster’s plain, simple room. “Master Sunback, I heard that all the teachers and staff are going to their home islands for the holiday. Won’t you be lonely here all by yourself during New Year’s?”

“I’ll be alone. It will be quiet. I will love every minute.” She laughed and her eyes wrinkled into starbursts.

As she signed the paper, I noticed a long metal trough at the end of the deck that held lotus plants. The leaves were scarred and brown, and the flowers drooped on their stalks. I knew that Brother Chalad, our Heart teacher, had been spending time healing the lotus that grew in the courtyard. Something was wrong with them, but any time I asked what it was, he changed the subject.

Beside the trough, a large book lay open to a page in the center.

Master Sunback noticed me looking at it. “That is my headmaster’s book. It has the name of every Novice who has come through our Academy.”

She picked up the book and held it out for me. Each page was divided into three columns. Written at the top were the categories: *Breath*, *Heart*, *Hand*. In each column, she had written Novice’s names, along with a few notes for each.

I flipped the pages. There had been so many students over the years. It reminded me how old Master Sunback was.

I saw the name *Dew* written in the *Hand Guardian* column. The notes said *Jaicat* and *headstrong*, and it listed her Hand Guardian power as *strategic defense*.

"Oh, this must be Master Dew!" I said.

Master Sunback smiled and nodded. "Dew was a real troublemaker in her day. Always scrapping and goofing around with the other students."

"Really? Ha! She's so strict now, I can't imagine it! And how about our year …"

I flipped forward until I got to the pages with fresh, dark ink. I saw Sam's name, and Cherry's. Salan and Mikko.

But then I frowned. "Rella's name is still in here?"

Rella had been my roommate when we first arrived on Lotus Island. She was snobby and mean, and she had cheated on her transformation test. Instead of studying and going to class, she had used ancient, magical chants that we discovered in a ruined temple in the jungle. She had almost convinced me to use the chants too, but at the last minute I learned how to transform on my own.

Master Sunback had dismissed Rella from the Academy, and I thought we would never see her again. But then she showed up on Bokati Island during our field study. We caught her cutting down precious Bokati trees, and we had to fight her to prevent her from destroying the forest.

She had done one bad thing after another, so it was a shock to see her name still in the book.

Master Sunback tilted her head. "Rella broke our rules, and I had to send her away. But she was well on her way to becoming a Guardian. And a powerful one too. I can't simply erase her."

"But you've put her under the 'Breath Guardian' column. She's such a good fighter."

When Rella used the temple chants, she could transform into a silver leopard with the power to create shadows. Not only could she slip into the shadows, becoming invisible, but she was also fierce in battle. Surely that made her a Hand Guardian, like Cherry.

“Rella is multitalented,” said Master Sunback. “But her power—the ability to gather shadows and disappear from sight—is an ancient Breath trait.”

“I wonder where she is now …”

Rella had vanished after we defeated her on Bokati Island. In the months since then, no one had heard a word about her.

I caught sight of my name, entered in the “Heart Guardian” column, underneath Salan’s.

Although all the other students’ names had been written in ink, mine was written very lightly in pencil. I looked up at Master Sunback. “You’re still not sure about me, are you?”

“I am absolutely sure that you belong here, Plum. You are different than the others, but that difference is a great thing. Your ability to increase the powers of your friends has been a much-needed gift to us this year.”

I smiled. “Thank you. I’m finally starting to feel like I really belong here.”

I looked again at the trough of brown lotus plants. I decided to ask the question that I had wondered about for months, ever since I first overheard Master Sunback talk about it.

“Master Sunback, are the Guardians losing their powers?”

She raised one eyebrow and looked at me. “You’re very observant, Plum. Are you sure that your Guardian power isn’t super hearing?”

I blushed.

“It’s true, our powers are fading,” she explained. “I can feel it in myself. I thought it was because I was growing old, but the other Guardians have noticed it too. Your class of Novices doesn’t know enough about what it should feel like to be a Guardian, so you don’t notice the difference. But the way that you can boost the powers of your friends? That level of power is what the Guardians used to have all the time.”

I tried to understand. “I heard you say once that the lotus plants and the Guardians are connected. Is it some kind of sickness that’s making us weak? Just like the lotus?”

“I’m not sure,” said Master Sunback. “There are things about the Guardians that even I don’t know. Perhaps our time of power is coming to an end.”

She placed her hand on my arm. “But you shouldn’t worry about that. You need to go on a holiday with your friends and have fun! Do you know what your New Year wish will be?”

I squeezed my shell pendant. “Well, I am pretty sure that my mother made a wish for me when I was a baby that I would grow up to become a Guardian. I think that wish is going to come true on its own.” I looked up at her quickly. “As long as I keep up with my studies, of course.”

She smiled. “Oh, of course.”

“But I think *my* wish is for something … more. I mean, becoming a Guardian is such an amazing dream and I know I’ll be lucky to become one. But I want to do something important with my powers. Something, well … big.”

“Ah, yes,” said Master Sunback slowly. “Something big.”

“Cherry is strong, and Salan can heal things, and Sam has all these super senses. I know that it’s wonderful that I can make their powers even more powerful. But I want to do something really great on my *own* too.”

“Plum, everything we do is important. Even the things that seem small.” She put her hand over mine and squeezed it. She tilted her head to the side. “Does that sound like something an old person would say?”

I hesitated. “No offense, but … yes. A little.”

She laughed from her belly. “Well, at least I’m aware of it! Try not to worry too much, my dear. You’re finding your way in this world every day. And when you’re on Nakhon Island, just remember this one thing and you’ll be fine: Don’t drink the water from the bowl. Wash your fingers in it.”

“But, Master Sunback, that makes no sense.”

She laughed again. “Trust me.”

“Oh my gosh!” shouted Cherry. “Look—are those Guardians?”

We all rushed to the boat’s railing and leaned out to catch a glimpse. The breeze whipped through our clothes. Schools of colorful fish darted underneath our boat’s hull, nibbling the coral gardens below. We had just dropped off two Novices at South Bone, and we were cutting through the water, zipping between the Bone islands.

“Yes, there they are!” I cried, pointing to the horizon.

A pair of giant wingrays flew through the air, skimming above the surface of the sea. With a few flaps of their gray, leathery wings, they glided away from us, following the curve of the reef.

“Wow,” said Salan dreamily. “I love the way they fly. So elegant.”

“I remember seeing those Guardians on our first night on Lotus Island,” said Mikko. “Master Sunback said they monitor the coral reefs

around here."

Just like Hetty and Sam, Salan and Mikko were also on their way home to Nakhon Island for the holidays. The six of us sat together near the front of the boat, watching the wingrays until they disappeared into the distance.

"It's so cool that they get to do their Guardian work together," said Sam.

"Wouldn't it be awesome if we all get assigned to work together when we graduate from the Guardian Academy?" said Mikko.

"Does that ever happen?" I asked.

"Sometimes," said Cherry. "If there's a big problem that needs a lot of help."

"I hope that I get assigned close to home," said Salan. "That way I could see my family."

Sam leaned back against the railing. "I want my assignment to be somewhere far away. Somewhere I've never been before."

Hetty turned toward him. "No way. Lady Ubon will make sure you end up close to her. You might even be the first Guardian assigned to Nakhon Island!"

Sam sighed. "Maybe. My mother always has her own big plans for me, that's for sure."

We spent the boat ride listening to Sam tell us about his life on Nakhon Island. He said his mother was usually very busy working and going to Island Council meetings. He didn't have any brothers or sisters, but he had a lot of extended family who mostly lived on the western side of the island. His childhood sounded lonely, which must have been one reason we had become friends so fast.

Hours passed, and just when I felt like we would never arrive, Sam pointed past the bow of our boat. "Look, I think we're coming up to Nakhon Island now!"

"Finally!" said Hetty.

The sun had begun to sink toward the sea. The tall buildings of Nakhon's city made a jagged silhouette against the wash of orange, pink,

and red in the sky. As the sun ducked behind the buildings, all the lights blinked on at once. It looked like a swarm of twile-flies hovering above the water.

“Holy pomelo seeds!” Cherry gasped.

“It’s so beautiful,” I whispered.

“Those are the skyscrapers,” said Salan. “They call the buildings that because their roofs are so high that they scrape the clouds.”

Soon our boat was chugging into the harbor. We were close enough to the shore that we had to crane our necks way back to see the tops of the buildings.

We motored closer to the shore, weaving around other boats: cargo boats and passenger ferries, and even a party boat with a six-piece band and people dancing on the top deck. Hoverbots zipped along the water, counting all the boats and checking their licenses.

Cherry leaned over the rail and sniffed the air. “Mmmm, did you see what they’re eating on that party boat? They have a whole long table of food, and the people are going down the line, filling their plates up with whatever they want!”

Sam and Hetty laughed. “That’s called a buffet,” said Sam. “You’ll get to eat from one at our New Year’s Party.”

Our boat finally swung alongside the dock. “Depart here for Nakhon City Harbor!” called the boat captain. “Don’t forget your luggage!”

We hugged Hetty, Mikko, and Salan goodbye. Hetty lived not far from Sam, near the Nakhon Central Library. The boat would take her on to Seaglass Harbor, where Hetty’s sister would pick her up. And then Mikko and Salan would go one more stop, to Sunrise Village, where their families lived.

“Come by and stay with us anytime,” Sam called to them. “You have my address.”

Salan patted his pocket. “I do! Have fun and we’ll see you soon!”

Hetty waved. “Come and meet me at the library!”

The rest of us gathered our things and started to make our way down the boat's gangway. The dock was crowded with passengers getting on and off other boats. I tried to stay close to Cherry in the crowd of people. I didn't want to get lost, but I was so distracted. I couldn't help but stare in wonder at everything.

And then, I felt the ground beneath my feet shudder, like the earth was shivering.

"What was that?" I shouted, ready to transform and spring into action. "Sam! Cherry!"

The people nearby looked at me and snickered.

"That was just one of Nakhon's famous tremors," said Sam. "They're completely harmless, but I forgot that they take some getting used to."

I exhaled with relief. But when I went to step forward, I lost my footing in my too-small shoes, tripped, and fell.

"Hey, watch where you're going!" said a boy beside me.

"Ugh, these newcomers always get in the way," said the girl with him.

They laughed as they stepped over me and my stuff.

Sam hurried to help me up. "Don't pay any attention to them."

"I'm sorry," I said, hoping no one could see how red my cheeks were. "I really wish my shoes fit."

"Well, don't worry—we aren't walking far. There's our hovercoach."

A sleek silver vehicle with an open top glided toward us, right up to the edge of the dock, where the city kids who had stepped over me stood waiting for their rides. The coach glided silently six inches over the ground. The driver got out and greeted Sam, then started loading our luggage into the trunk.

"*This* is our ride?" said Cherry, hopping into one of the seats. "Oh yeah, this is awesome! Come on, Plum!"

Sam and I slid into the back beside Cherry.

The driver turned around to smile at us. "It's good to see you again, Sam."

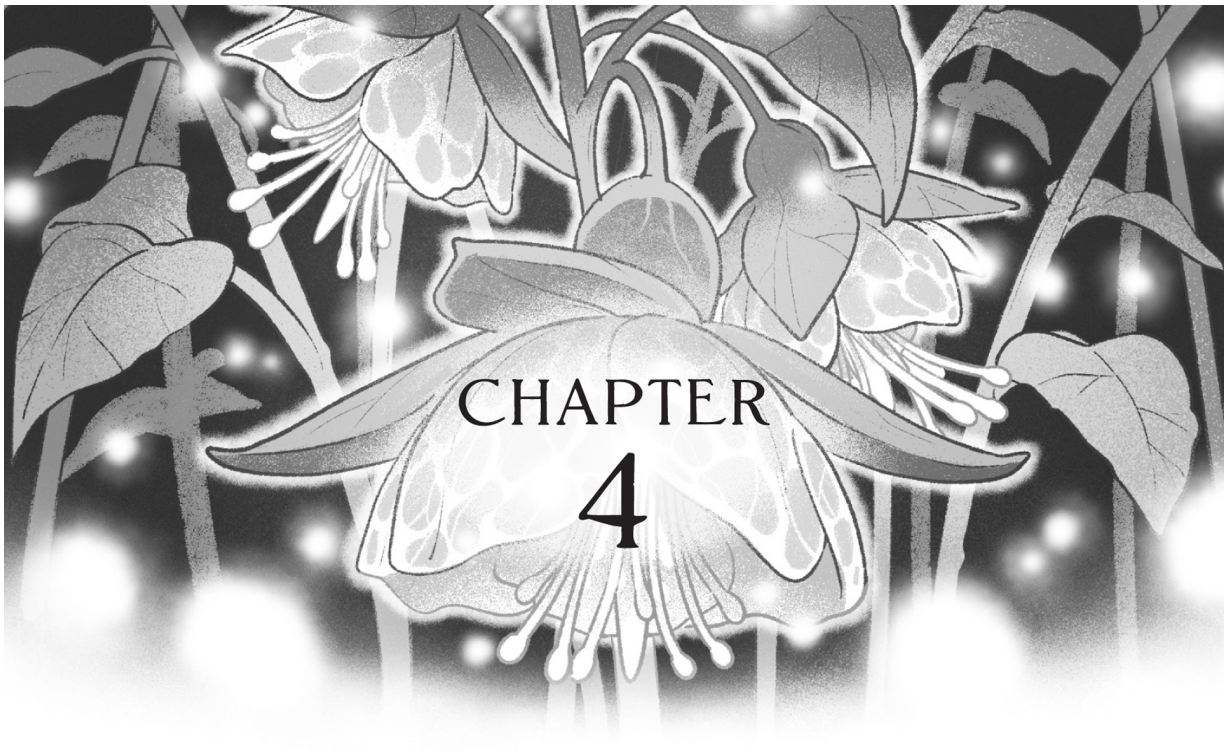
"You too, Sifton," said Sam. "Let's take our friends home."

And now it was the city kids' turn to stare with their mouths open.

I wish I could say that it didn't feel satisfying to zip off into the night in Sam's silver coach while everyone else watched us in awe.

But that would be a lie.

It felt amazing.



Sifton drove the hovercoach down the dazzling streets of Nakhon City. With all the stars crowded out by the bright lights, the sky overhead was dark. There was so much that I had never seen before: street vendors, restaurants, stores, and so many people! Sam, Cherry, and I couldn't stop laughing as the wind whipped through our hair.

"And I used to think that the City Square on Big Crab Island was big," I said to Cherry, pointing up at all the skyscrapers.

"Are you kidding?" she said. "The entire population of Big Crab Island would fit in one of these buildings!"

Sam pointed out this or that famous landmark or place to eat. It seemed like he had been all over the city.

The skyscrapers thinned as we reached the edge of town. For the next few minutes, we drove past the skeletons of half-built towers. It seemed

that the big city of Nakhon was in the process of growing even bigger. A lighted billboard showed an image of nice houses with happy families smiling inside them. The sign read coming soon: new luxury homes!

Sam leaned toward the front seat. “What’s all that about, Sifton?”

“A new project from the Island Council,” said Sifton. He pointed to a group of hulking metal dozerbots that sat waiting to dig up the ground. They looked like sleeping elephants with jagged open jaws. “They’re clearing out the last of the yamyam groves to build big, fancy houses. You have to be on a waiting list to get one.”

High above the construction site, a few yamyam trees still clung to the hillside. I realized that as we had zipped through the city, I had seen hardly

any trees at all.

The coach turned onto a road that hugged the coastline, and then turned onto a street lined by a dense tunnel of trees. It was like all Nakhon's trees had run away to grow here.

I leaned my head back and let the wind blow through my hair. "What street is this?" I asked Sam.

When he answered, I could tell he was blushing, even though it was too dark to see. "Um, it's not really a street. It's our driveway."

Cherry squeezed my hand as we rounded a curve and Sam's sprawling house came into view.

"Whoa," she whispered.

The hovercoach parked and we all hopped out. Cherry and I started to get our suitcases out of the trunk, but hoverbots zipped out of the house to pick up the luggage.

I couldn't help flinching away when the hoverbots got near me. The last time we had seen bots, we had fought against them on Bokati Island.

Rella had stolen a fleet of hoverbots from Nakhon Island and used them to cut down the Bokati trees. It was hard to shake the memory of the bots sawing into the precious Bokati wood.

Sam must have noticed my reaction because he leaned close and said, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember: The bots only do what they are programmed to do." He handed one of the hoverbots his bag. "And these are programmed to carry our stuff."

A tall man walked down the driveway toward us. He wore a crisp suit and his hair pulled back in a bun. He cleared his throat and said, "Sam, it's so good to have you back. Please allow me to show you and your guests to the house. Your mother is waiting for you."

"Of course," said Sam with a little bow. He gestured to us. "Cherry and Plum, this is my mother's head adviser, Councilor Yurn. Councilor Yurn, these are my friends who will be staying with us."

"Delighted to meet you," said Yurn as we bowed in greeting. "I mostly work with Lady Ubon in her hoverbot labs. But if you need anything at all

while you are staying at the Ubon estate, just say the word."

He led us inside and we left our shoes at the door. We followed him down halls lined with paintings and sculptures. Thickly embroidered tapestries hung from the walls. Every now and then we would pass a hoverbot that was dusting or sweeping the floor.

Finally we emerged out of the hall and passed windows that opened onto a big garden. The trees along the path were lit with spotlights. I could hear the gentle roll of waves in the distance. There was a building on the other side of the garden, close to the shore.

"That is the hoverbot laboratory, where we work on many exciting projects," said Councilor Yurn. He stopped at the foot of a staircase. "I'll leave you here, but I hope to see you again soon to give you a tour of our lab."

Sam ran up the stairs. "Mom? We're here!" he called. "Come say hi to Cherry and Plum!"

While we waited, two young staff members appeared holding bowls out to me and Cherry. The bowls were full of water with jasmine flowers floating in it.

Cherry started to take one of the bowls from them, but I stopped her. I remembered what Master Sunback had told me. "Watch," I whispered.

I dipped my fingers in the bowl and swished them around, then wiped my hands clean on the towel draped over the staff person's arm.

"How'd you know to do that?" whispered Cherry as she copied me.

"Some of us just know proper manners," I said with a wink.

Just then Lady Ubon appeared at the top of the stairs with Sam. "Girls, it is so good to see you again!"

Cherry and I bowed deeply. I wanted to like Lady Ubon because she was Sam's mother and he was my friend. But I once overheard her tell Master Sunback that she wanted to buy Lotus Island. I didn't like the idea of anyone trying to own Lotus Island or the Guardian Academy.

But tonight, she was warm and gracious. She opened her arms wide and embraced us on the stairs.

“Welcome to our home,” she said. “After dinner, we’ll show you to your room. I hope you don’t mind sharing? We have plenty of space for you both to have your own, but I thought it would be more fun to stay together?”

“Oh yes, we love sharing a room,” I said.

“Now, follow me,” said Lady Ubon. “Are you hungry?”

“Ma’am, I am *always* hungry,” said Cherry.

In the dining room, Lady Ubon showed us to the table. As we sat down, we felt the floor beneath us shudder, and the glasses clinked softly. “You will get used to the tremors, girls, I promise,” said Lady Ubon.

Sam raised his eyebrows. “Tremors here? We don’t usually feel them at the house.”

Lady Ubon tilted her head. “I suppose the island is shifting. It’s nothing to be concerned about.” She motioned for the staff to start bringing out the food.

I watched as she lay her napkin in her lap. She nodded encouragingly. I could tell that she really wanted me to feel comfortable in her house.

My first instinct was to feel out of place and nervous that I wasn’t doing the right thing. But Lady Ubon was being so kind, and I knew Sam was just glad to have me there. I made a promise to myself right then. For the entire New Year holiday, I would have a great time and let go of all my worries.

The waiters brought out little porcelain bowls. This time, the water was dyed pale pink and it had tiny strawberry flowers floating in it.

Cherry and I nodded at each other. We knew what to do.

We plunged our fingers into the bowl and swirled.

We felt very proud of ourselves.

And then, to our horror, Lady Ubon took her spoon and dipped it into her bowl and took a big sip.

Sam stifled a laugh as he leaned close to me and whispered, “You two just washed your fingers in the strawberry soup!”

So far, almost everything on Nakhon Island was completely different from what I was used to. But one thing was the same.

"Cherry, it's time to get up!"

I pulled the curtains back in our room and the morning light poured through the window. Cherry crammed the pillow on top of her head.

"Leave me alone! We don't have any classes to go to! Can't we sleep in for once in our lives?"

I pulled the pillow off. "We're supposed to meet Sam and Sifton downstairs. They're taking us to breakfast and then we're going shopping for clothes for the New Year's party."

"Ugh. You woke me up for *shopping*? Just pick something for me. I don't care what I wear."

"All right, phase two," I said, yanking off the covers. Cherry yelped and curled into a ball. "I wouldn't have the first idea about what to buy

you. Come on! Lady Ubon is being so kind to buy us something nice."

"All right, all right, fine. I'm coming," she said with a stretch. "Besides, I imagine that breakfast in the city is probably pretty great."

* * *

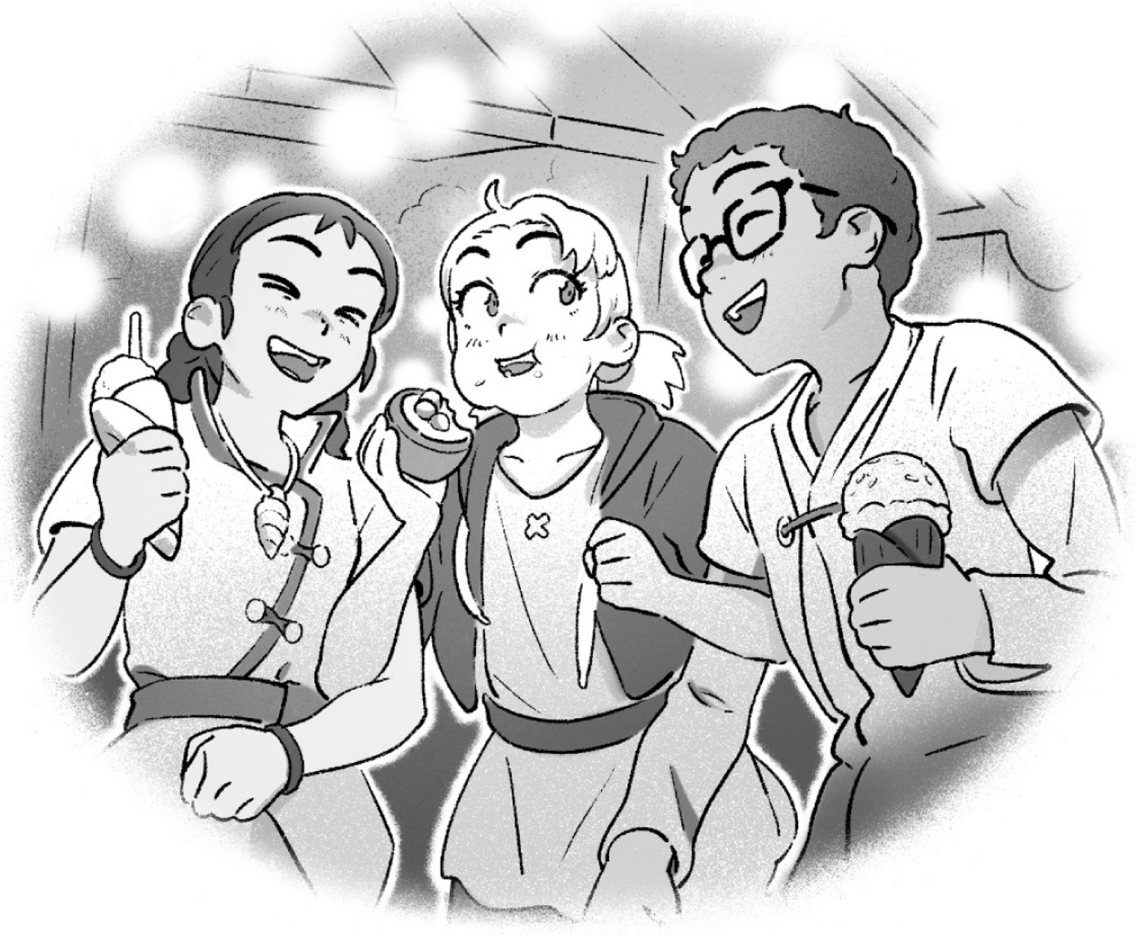
"Great" did not even begin to describe it.

Cherry darted down the street, flitting from one food stall to the next like a fish in a coral reef.

"Plum, smell that scrambled tofu! Oooh, are those chive griddle cakes? I love those! Oh my gosh, Plum, check out the size of that lemelon custard tart! Oooh, yamyam cream puffs—mmffh ohmmmm mmmm!"

I laughed as Cherry tried to talk with her mouth full. "Slow down. We haven't even walked down half the street yet!"

Sam smiled as he took a sip of the taro-bean milkshake he had bought at the last stall. "Nah, you should eat everything. We can come back tomorrow for more."



I knew I was going to have a stomachache by midmorning, and I didn't care. We wandered down the streets, choosing this or that mouthwatering treat from the vendors. Lady Ubon had to spend the morning working with Councilor Yurn in her lab, but she had sent Sifton with us to pay for things. I felt a little bad that we were buying so much, but Sam loved it all.

"I can't decide what makes me happier," he said. "Eating or watching you two eat."

Cherry pulled us down another street with colorful banners hanging overhead. "Sam, as your friend, I feel that it's my responsibility to increase your happiness. Come on—they have shaved icicles!"

As we finished licking the sticky syrup from our icicles off our fingers, Sifton appeared in the crowd and waved to us. "Sam! Girls! It's time for your appointment at Madam Darning's!"

We piled into the coach and Sifton drove us down a street lined with colorful shophouses. We stopped in front of a purple shop with flowers growing in the window boxes. The sign on the front door said madam darning's fine fashions.

When we walked inside, we were greeted by a woman with glasses and sewing pins sticking out of the bun on her head.

"Come in, children!" she said with a flourish of her skirts. "I'm Madam Darning, and I am at your service. You girls don't know how lucky you are," she continued as she led us to a tall mirror. "An invitation to the Ubon family's New Year's party is impossible to get. It's a *very* special occasion. Guests start ordering their dresses months in advance."

Cherry windmilled her arms around like she was setting up to spar an opponent. "Ma'am, I should warn you. I haven't worn a dress in about … forever."

"Not a problem," said Madam Darning warmly. "I have something both fabulous and functional."

The dressmaker handed Cherry a jumpsuit made from a shimmery fabric that was bright green, like a cherry stem. Cherry changed into it and then modeled it for us.

She came out of the dressing room and spun around. "What do you think?"

Madam Darning clapped her hands. "It's perfect on you!"

Cherry strutted into the middle of the room and did a few dance moves. Then she set her feet wide apart and bent her knees, crouching to the floor.

Rrrriipppp! The seam along her backside split wide open.

Cherry shook her head apologetically. "Uh-oh."

Madam Darning sighed. "I'll add a patch of fabric to the rear. Though honestly, I've never had a customer who needed to do a full squat in one of my creations!" She turned to me and eyed me over the edge of her glasses. "Hmm, now for you, my dear. I know just the thing."

She went into the back and came out cradling a bundle of wispy cloth.

“Ooh, dark blue,” said Cherry. “That’ll look great on you.”

“It’s not blue,” corrected Madam Darning. “This color is *midnight*. And look.” She held the fabric closer so I could see. There were tiny silver beads woven into the delicate threads. “These beads are actually lights. They are timed to glow when the lantern trees bloom. Trust me. If you wear a dress made of this fabric, everyone will be looking at you when New Year’s strikes.”

My fingers tingled at the thought of being the center of attention.

“Do you like it?” asked Sam.

I nodded. “Yes. I love it!”

Madam Darning took the fabric back. “I’ll keep working on these outfits today. And then I’ll bring them by the Ubon house when they’re finished.”

Cherry hooked her arms around our shoulders. “I’m going to be eating those lantern dumplings in *style*.”

After Madam Darning took our measurements, I went to the front of the shop to look at the shoes. I chose a simple pair of sandals in my size and gave Sifton my own money to pay for them. While Cherry changed back into her regular clothes, I looked out the front window and watched the people bustling up and down the street. Suddenly the floor shifted beneath my feet. Another tremor?

I looked up at Sam, who put on a relaxed smile.

“Don’t worry,” he said calmly. “It’s just the—”

He was interrupted by another longer tremor. It was strong enough that Madam Darning’s jars of pins slid off the shelves and shattered on the floor. My jaw rattled, and I clutched onto the windowsill until the ground stopped shaking.

Outside, the people on the streets all began shouting and running in the same direction.

I turned to Sam and Cherry, who looked as stunned as I felt. “Come on, we should see if they need help!”

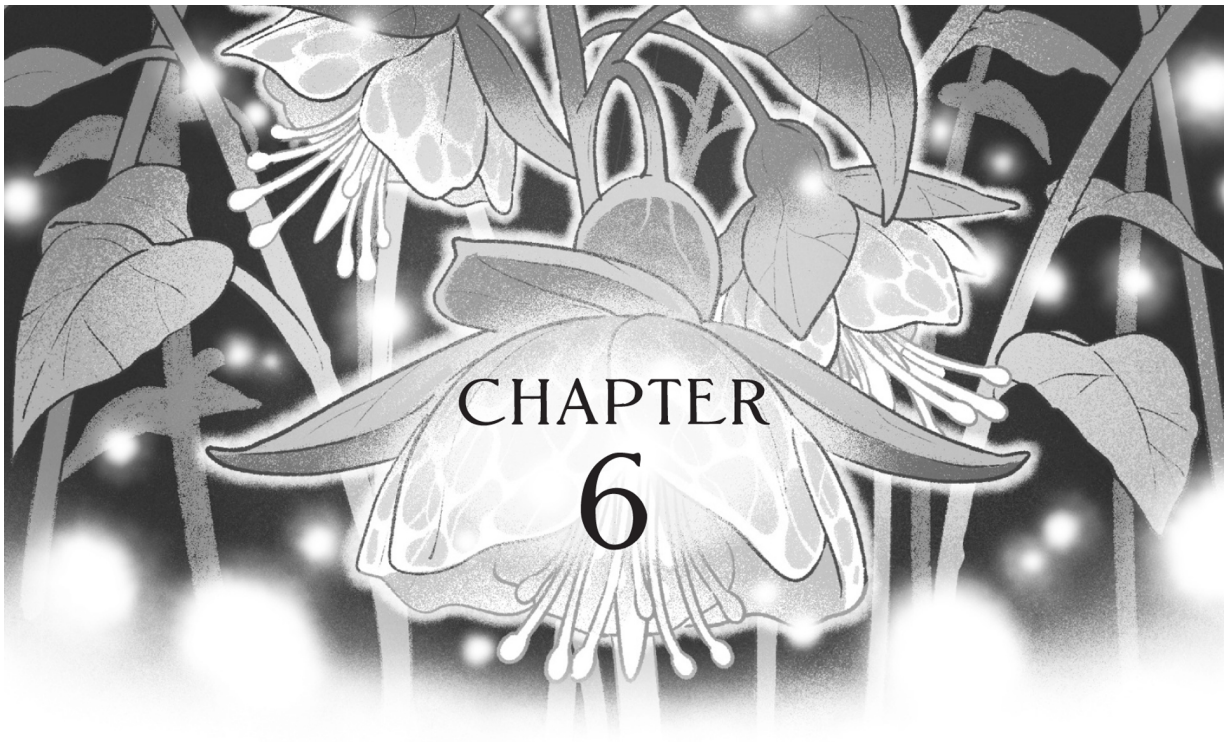
We ran outside together. A few blocks away we could see a cluster of tall apartment buildings. Sam transformed into his Guardian form—a great, shaggy wolfhund. He raised his snout and sniffed the air.

"Concrete dust," he said. "I can hear people shouting for help." He sniffed again. "And I smell fire."

Cherry and I nodded at each other and immediately transformed into our Guardian forms.

Sifton reached out for us. "Wait! Sam! Girls! Come back!"

But we were already bounding up the street.



We dashed through the streets in our Guardian forms. I focused on the clatter of my hooves on the pavement so I wouldn't think about how hard my heart was pounding. People ran past us in the opposite direction. Even in their panic, they pointed at us and gasped. Since Guardians had never been assigned to Nakhon Island, most of them had probably never seen creatures like us before.

Sam, in his wolfhund form, stepped in front of a family. "Please, tell us what's happening. We want to help!"

The family pointed behind them. "Dozerbots were digging, tearing up the earth. Then we felt the tremor. This one was the worst one we've had! Our whole apartment felt like it would collapse!"

"Dozerbots?" said Cherry. "You think that's what's causing the tremors?"

Sam frowned. “Come on, let’s keep going,” he said, leading the way farther along the street.

We stopped at the edge of the neighborhood, close to the new construction that Sifton had shown us on our first day. In the distance, the dozerbots swung their big metal heads beneath the billboard for the “new luxury homes.”

“Look at that!” Cherry pointed up at a high-rise building. It leaned off-center, and a cloud of dark smoke was coming out the windows near the top.

People were streaming out the doors on the ground floor, covering their faces and coughing.

“The tremors must have damaged the building and started a fire!” said Sam.

The whir of hoverbot motors cut through the sound of people shouting. Two dozen bots were followed by a large hovercraft with a water tank on the back. Bots riding in the hovercraft aimed water hoses at the smoking windows.

Other hoverbots zoomed past us into the building. They flashed lights and beeped out messages: “Evacuate … evacuate this way …”

Cherry, Sam, and I followed them and tried our best to help people get out of the building. Cherry scooped up small children in her gillybear arms. I bent down to let a mother with a baby climb onto my back. I galloped them across the street to safety.

High above us, the bots on the hovercraft worked to put out the fire. The ribbons of smoke became puffy plumes of steam.

I dropped off one more family and then trotted back to the building’s entrance. “Did everyone get out?” I asked Sam.

“The hoverbots flew in one more time to check.”

A hoverbot zipped out through the front doors. As it passed us, the lights on its control panel flashed and it announced, “Evacuation completed.”

Other hoverbots nudged us out of the way so they could block off the entrance with orange ropes to keep people from going back inside. A crowd now stood on the opposite side of the street. Hoverbots flitted from one family to the next, offering water and first aid.

Now I understood why Nakhon Island had never wanted a Guardian assigned to it. The hoverbots seemed to have everything under control. We had helped a little, but they didn't really need us.

I noticed that Sam had gotten quiet. His pointed wolfhund ears twitched.

"Sam? Is everything okay?"

"I can't tell," he said. "I thought I heard something, but there's so much noise. Plum, give me a little help?"

He touched his paw to my hoof. We shut our eyes as I focused on increasing Sam's powers.

After a moment, his eyes popped open. "There's still someone in the building! I can hear them!" He scanned the upper floors and then pointed to a high window near where the fire had been. "Look!"

An elderly man and woman waved their hands behind the glass.

"They're saying they can't open the window," said Sam. "And something fell down in their apartment, blocking their door. They're coughing. There must be smoke in their room!"

Cherry and I tried to flag down the rescue hoverbots, who were flying off the way they came. "Hey, come back! Come back!" we yelled. "There's someone else there!"

But they wouldn't listen. "Evacuation complete," they beeped.

"We have to find Sifton," said Sam. "He can call my mother to help us."

"There's no time!" said Cherry. "We have to get those people out! Plum, boost my powers!"

"Cherry, don't go inside the building, it's too dangerous!" said Sam.

"I won't! I've got an idea!" she said.

Cherry put her paw on my shoulder, and I focused all my attention on her. Within seconds she was four feet taller than before. I had barely finished when she sprinted to the building and began climbing up the wall, using the metal balcony railings as handholds.

"Go, Cherry!" I called. "You can do it!"

Cherry quickly reached the balcony of the elderly couple's apartment. She pressed her paws against the glass and slid the window open. The man and woman slowly crawled out their window and stood huddled together on the balcony. Cherry held out her arms and they climbed onto her back, clutching tight to her butter-colored fur.

"Do you think she can hold them?" asked Sam.

"She can. When I boost her strength, Cherry is strong enough to hold up an elephant!"

We watched as Cherry began climbing down to the balcony below. She was being very careful with the elderly people clinging to her back. But when she put her foot on the lower balcony, its railing groaned and we heard the *pop!* of bolts snapping.

“Oh no!” I cried. “The tremors must have damaged the structure! It’s going to break!”

I could see panic on Cherry’s face. In her gillybear form, she was too big for the balcony to hold her. But if she transformed back into herself, she wouldn’t be able to carry the couple.

“I’ll go get help!” said Sam, breaking into a run.

“Please hurry!” I cried. I looked up at Cherry, stamping my hooves uselessly. I had to help her, but what could I do?

On a small plot of dirt in front of the building, a gnarled and decrepit yamyam tree grew. Most of its leaves were gone and its bark was nearly black, but like all yamyam trees, it was tall. Its branches reached up, nearly to the height of the balcony where Cherry was trapped. If the tree

could stretch just a little higher, she could reach it and climb down to safety.

I hurried to the tree and placed my hoof against its trunk. This was a long shot, but I had to try. “Grandmother Yamyam,” I whispered. “Please can you help my friend? Can you reach her?”

The yamyam answered me in a creaky voice.

I cannot reach her. I cannot grow.

Above me, I heard the groan of the metal balcony as it bent under Cherry’s weight. The old woman holding on to her screamed.

The people on the sidewalk had crowded in closer behind me.

“That balcony won’t hold them much longer!” shouted someone.

“Where are the hoverbots?” cried another person.

I couldn’t wait for Sam. I had to do something!

“Grandmother Yamyam,” I said to the withered tree. “Do you have any green wood left in you?”

There is green life deep inside me. But my time is over. I am too weak to grow.

I had a wild idea. It would probably never work, but I had to try.

I knelt at the base of the yamyam tree. My forelegs rested on her roots. I tapped my antlers to the knotty bumps on her trunk where yamyam fruits had once sprouted.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath to steady my pounding heart. I let my breath out slowly and did the same thing I did when I boosted the powers of my friends. I pictured a golden thread running between me and the yamyam tree. I imagined my energy flowing from my antlers, through her bark, deep into her green heartwood.

“Grow,” I whispered. “Please. Grow.”

I opened my eyes and stood on all four legs. The dark bark of the yamyam rippled and cracked. Her long limbs shuddered and creaked. Tiny green shoots burst out of her branches and plump yamyam fruits popped out all over her trunk and roots. Decades of time flashed in seconds as the

tree grew tall, then taller still. Within moments, the tree reached up over Cherry's head.

"All right, we're coming down!" called Cherry as she swung her legs over the edge of the balcony and grabbed hold of a yamyam branch. The elderly couple held tight to her back. As Cherry's back paw left the balcony, the last bolt gave way. The metal ripped free of the building and came crashing down onto the sidewalk below.

But the couple was safe, clinging to Cherry's broad back as she carefully made her way down the yamyam tree.

When Cherry finally touched the ground, the people gathered around me cheered and helped the elderly couple across the street.

Sam came running up with Sifton and a crew of medic bots gliding behind them.

"Plum! Cherry!"

The three of us transformed into our human forms and hugged one another.

"Thank goodness you're all right!" said Sam, squeezing us both tighter.

The man and woman Cherry had saved wrapped their arms around us too, thanking us.

"Holy smokes, Plum, *how* did you do that with the tree?" asked Cherry.

I held her tight and stared at the yamyam. "Honestly? I have no idea."

Later that afternoon, I knelt on the moss in the Ubon family's garden with my hoof on the trunk of a young lantern tree.

"Come on, little one, can you grow?"

Hee hee, that tickles, the tree chuckled to me.

I sighed and transformed back into myself. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get any other plants to grow like I had done with the yamyam.

I felt very confused. I had always been good at gardening. And Sam liked to say that vegetables grew better for me because I talked and sang to them. But I had never, ever made something grow as quickly as the old yamyam tree.

Had I really made the tree spring up? Or had she just heard my plea for help and done it on her own? I had tried to talk to her after the rescue was over, but she was silent. Trees were so strange. If they didn't want to talk, you couldn't get them to say a word.

I left the garden and went back into the house. Sam had left me here with a cup of tea and cookies while he went to talk to his mom about what happened. The cookies were gone and the tea was cold. I felt a little forgotten about.

Cherry had cut her paws during the rescue, and she was being treated in our room. I was anxious to check on her, but I knew I shouldn't interrupt the doctor. I wandered down the hallway and heard voices coming from Lady Ubon's office.

I started to raise my hand to knock on the door but stopped myself. I heard Sam's and his mother's voices on the other side. They sounded tense.

"Sam, I know that you're upset …" said Lady Ubon.

"You would be upset too, Mother! There were so many people running and so much smoke. We got lucky. People could have been badly hurt … or worse."

"But they didn't because you were there to help them. And because my hoverbots were there to quickly respond."

"But the people should never have been in danger in the first place. This new luxury construction project has to stop. The next time the tremors could be so bad that an entire city block could crumble!"

And then I heard a third voice. It was Councilor Yurn. "Sam, I understand your concerns. But the tremor today had nothing to do with the construction."

"I talked to the people living on that street," said Sam. "They say that the tremors have been growing stronger, and it all started with the construction project. It's the dozerbots. They're digging too deep. You have to stop using them!"

I heard a paper ruffling from hand to hand. "I asked our dozerbot crew for a report," said Councilor Yurn. "You can read it for yourself. They were not running the dozerbots when this tremor happened. We need to figure out the cause, but it's not the new construction."

Sam was silent.

Councilor Yurn cleared his throat. “Sam, the dozerbots aren’t causing the tremors, but I agree with you that the project is a problem.”

“You do?” said Sam.

“Yes,” continued Yurn. “I have told your mother many times that when the people of Nakhon see how magnificent the new luxury homes are, everyone will want one.”

“And we don’t have enough space here on Nakhon Island for that,” said Lady Ubon with a sigh.

“Mother, look how much space our family has here on our estate,” said Sam. “Do we really need …”

Councilor Yurn interrupted him. “I have been working very hard with your mother to find a true solution. So that everyone can have what they want. Do you know that there are other islands that have almost no one living on them? While here on Nakhon we have to push our people up, up into the sky. That’s not fair, now is it?”

“Other islands?” asked Sam.

“I’ve been searching for other places in our archipelago where we can expand,” said Lady Ubon. “I haven’t been successful yet, but I am not giving up.”

“We just need a little more,” said Councilor Yurn cheerfully. “Then everyone will be happy.”

I heard Lady Ubon rise from her chair and say softly to Sam, “Son, one day I’ll be gone, and you’ll be the one who has to make the decisions for all of Nakhon. I want to leave you in the best possible position to be a good leader. So you can carry on our family’s legacy.”

Their voices grew quiet and I could tell the conversation was almost over. I didn’t want them to know I had been listening. I ducked around the corner and then hurried up the stairs to the second floor.

When I got to the room I shared with Cherry, I heard voices inside, but it didn’t sound like the doctor.

I opened the door. “Salan! Mikko!”

They were gathered around Cherry’s bed. I ran up to them and tackled them in huge hugs.

“Oh my goodness, what are you two doing here?” I asked.

“Cherry suggested the doctor call me in to help heal her,” said Salan.

“Remember me? The gravely injured one?” said Cherry, holding up her hands, which were wrapped in cloth bandages.

Mikko laughed at her. “Oh, stop being so dramatic. Salan just healed you and the doctor said you could take the bandages off. Don’t even think about using this as an excuse to be lazy.”

“I’m exhausted from being a hero!” said Cherry. “Now, make yourself useful, Mikko, and fluff my pillows.”

“How about this instead?” said Mikko. He grabbed a pillow and whacked her with it. Cherry whacked him back and we all laughed.

The door opened and the doctor peeked her head inside. “Boys, as much as I appreciate your help with the patient, I’m afraid that I must insist that Cherry gets her rest.”

Cherry flopped back onto her pillows dramatically. “Oh yes, I need my rest. What would make me feel much better is to sleep *late* in the morning!”

I walked Salan and Mikko downstairs and went to find Sam so he could say hello to them. I wondered if he was still in his mother’s office. I tiptoed down the hall to see. Instead, Councilor Yurn came out of the room and shut the door behind him.

“Councilor, have you seen Sam?” I asked.

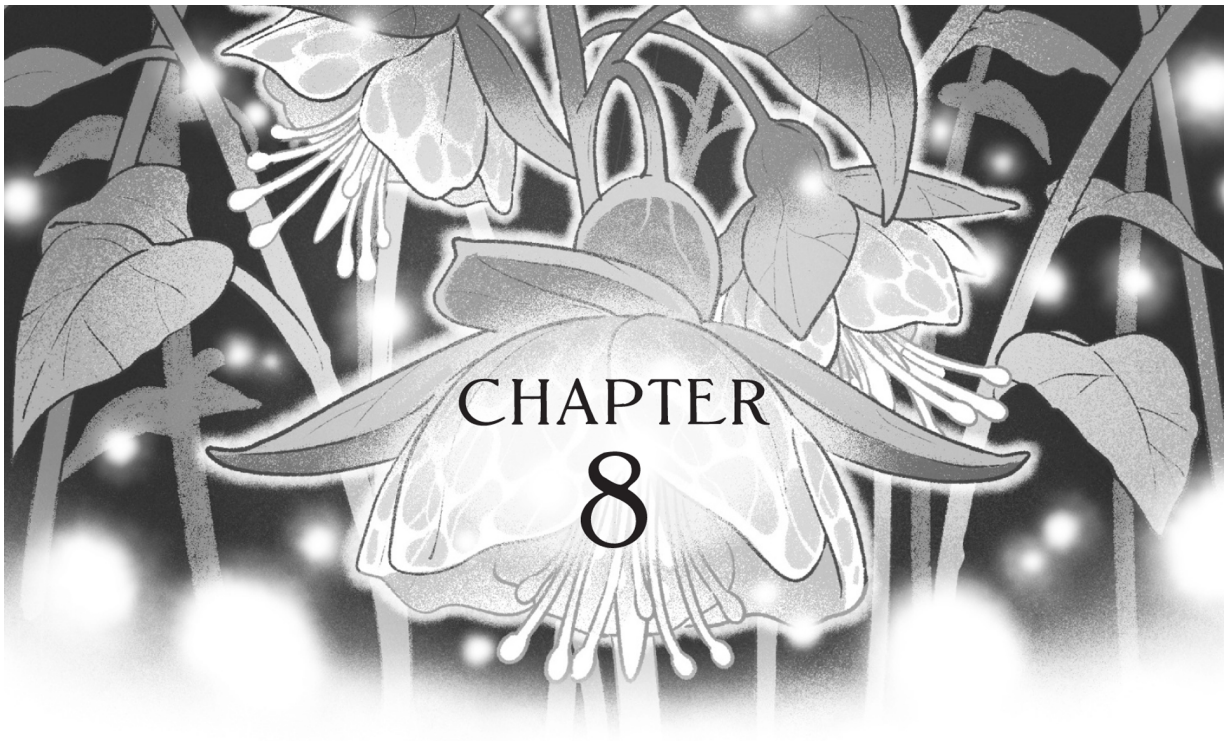
“Actually he just went looking for you.” Yurn straightened his jacket. “Plum, I haven’t had the chance to thank you for everything you did today.”

“Oh, it was nothing …”

“Nonsense,” said Yurn. “That rescue was heroic, and you deserve to be recognized.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, blushing. “But Cherry was the one who put herself in danger. She’s the one who deserves all the praise.”

“Well, praise is coming your way—along with many other good things.” Yurn smiled. “Trust me. I know a hero when I see one.”



The next day we went to visit Hetty at the Nakhon Central Library where her father worked. As Sifton's coach sped along, I kept replaying my conversation with Councilor Yurn. I didn't think I deserved any more praise or attention than the others. But still, every time I thought of being called a "hero," I couldn't help but smile.

When Sifton rolled up to the front of the library, Hetty practically hauled us out of the car.

"Come on! I want to show you our library before it opens!"

She led us up the steps and to the front door. A rush of cool air swept my hair back as we stepped inside.

My mouth dropped open. Everywhere I looked, I saw books, books, and more books. "Oh my gosh …" I whispered.

A man with a neat mustache walked into the entryway to great us.

“Everyone, this is my father, Shyu,” said Hetty. “Father, these are my friends!”

“Hetty has told me so much about you,” said Mister Shyu. “The library is still closed to the public for one more hour, so you have the place to yourselves.”

“Tell me everything,” said Hetty as she led us deeper into the library. “I want to hear all about Sam’s house and if they’ve started decorating for the party, and oh! I want to know what you’re wearing, and …”

I was too distracted to listen. Every inch of the walls was lined with shelves of books. Tall wooden ladders helped to reach the ones at the very top. Grandma and Grandpa had a couple of crumbling, old storybooks back home. And whenever we would visit Big Crab Island, they would take me to the little library there. But it was nothing like this.

We spent an hour among the bookshelves, talking and laughing and picking out stacks of books to take back to Sam’s house.

“So, what do you think of our library?” asked Hetty.

“Are you kidding?” I said, looking around. “I never want to leave!”

She grabbed my hand. “Come on, I have to show you my special spot before you go!”

We followed her up the stairs to the second floor. There were more shelves arranged around rows of wooden tables. Hetty showed us to a table in the corner of the room. Overhead, a stained-glass window cast a rainbow of light over the table, which was covered with old-looking books.

“Councilor Yurn has asked my dad to do some historical research,” said Hetty, pointing to a book that lay open. “I’ve been helping too.”

I gasped when I saw the beautiful illustration on the page. “Are you researching something about the Great Beast?”

The old legends said that our people once lived across the ocean, in a place called the Old Home. When humans destroyed the Old Home through their greed and fighting, the Great Beast carried all the animals across the sea, to safety. He also brought a group of humans who swore an oath to protect the natural world.

The Great Beast, exhausted from his journey, lay down in the ocean and his body became our islands. He gave his last shreds of power—from his heart, hands, and breath—to the humans who became the first Guardians.

"I love stories about the Great Beast," said Cherry. "Have you found anything interesting?"

"Well, most of the old stories are very similar," said Hetty. "But *this* book has something new."

She pushed the book toward us. The illustration showed the moment when the Great Beast swam across the ocean with all the animals and people on his back. "This book says that when the Great Beast left the Old Home, he let everyone bring only what they could hold in one hand."

"Oh yes!" said Sam. "Remember when we were on Bokati Island, Master Em told us that his great-great-great-grandmother brought the root of a Bokati tree? And that was how the whole Bokati forest got started."

I smiled to remember Master Em. He was a Breath Guardian with the power of intuition. He was old, cranky, and one of the greatest teachers I ever had.

Hetty nodded. "That's right. Well, this book says that the Great Beast brought something in *his* hand too." She pointed to the illustration. The Great Beast's fist was clenched tightly, but it was impossible to see what he was holding. There were letters inscribed over the drawing, but I didn't understand what the words meant.

"Wow, what do you think he was carrying?" asked Cherry, bouncing a little on her heels. "It had to be something really powerful, right?"

"No one knows," said Hetty, pointing down at the mysterious words written over the illustration. "Maybe we could find out if we could understand this writing."

"That is written in the language of the Old Home," said Mister Shyu, who had come up the stairs to join us. "The people of the Old Home spoke a different language than us, but they used our same alphabet."

A quick shiver ran up my arms. The chants painted on the walls of the ruined temple on Lotus Island were also written in the language of the Old Home.

I could still picture the chants, written in curling, gold letters. I had spoken them aloud only once, and I didn't understand what I was saying at the time. I had never told anyone on Lotus Island about them. As far as I knew, Rella and I were the only ones who had spoken them in centuries.

"We have some very old books that can help us translate, but they are not complete," said Mister Shyu. "Hetty and I won't give up trying though, will we?"

Hetty beamed. I could tell she was very proud of her father.

I stared down at the illustration again. If I could only take one thing from home, what would it be? I squeezed my shell necklace. My most precious item was on a string around my neck, so it came everywhere with me no matter what.

"Ah, Sam, before I forget, will you take this to your mother for me?" said Mister Shyu. He held out a thick sheet of paper that had been rolled into a tube. "She asked to borrow it from our archives. Please be very gentle with it, because it's quite delicate."

"I'll take good care of it, sir," said Sam.

We heard knocking and voices at the front doors of the library.

"It's almost time to open," said Mister Shyu.

"Promise you'll come visit again soon," said Hetty. "And I'll definitely be at the New Year's party!"

After we exited the library and climbed into the hovercoach, Sam unfurled the contents of the tube Mr. Shyu had given him. "Oh, what a beautiful map," he said, smoothing out the crinkling paper.

It focused on our islands, the Santipap Archipelago. But it also showed much more of the wider sea all around.

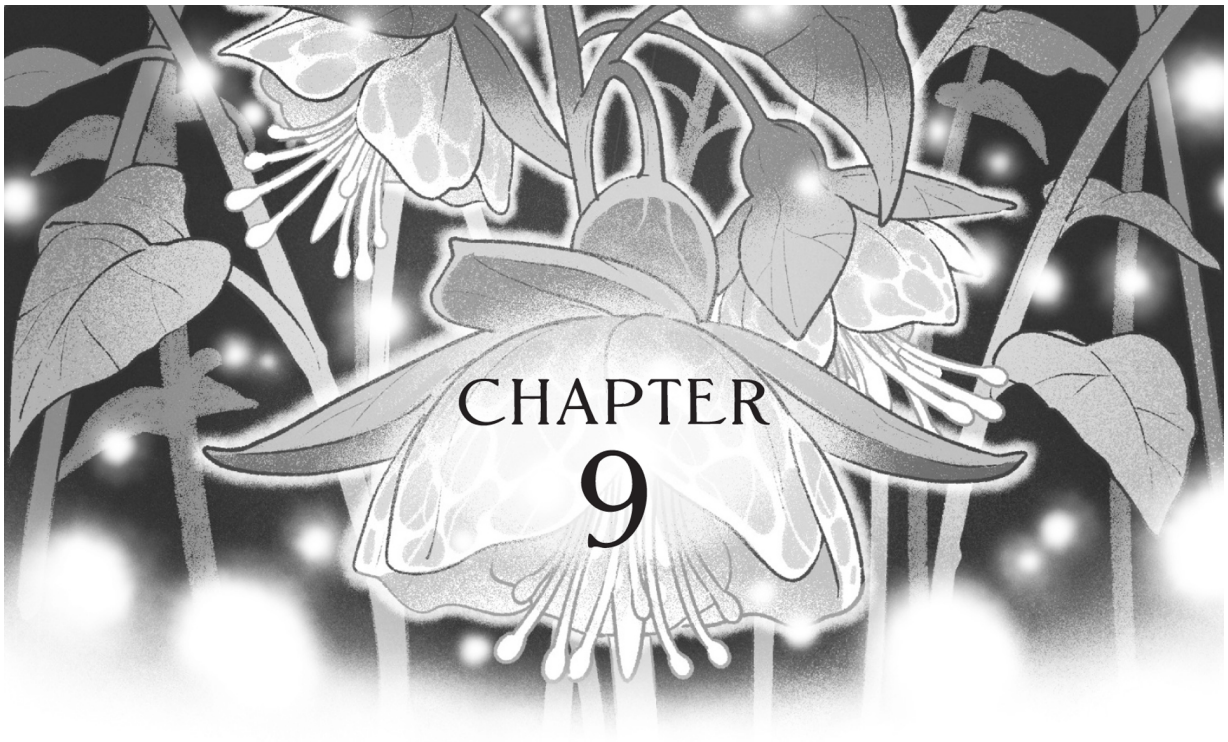
"Look how many teeny-tiny islands there are scattered over the sea," said Sam, pointing to all the small dots drawn in the water.

"They make my Little Island look so big," I said with a smile.

“I wonder what Mother wants this for,” he said.

Cherry glanced at the map, uninterested. She kicked off her shoes and leaned back in her seat. “Sam, I gotta tell you. I could get used to traveling around by hovercoach. This is the life!”

Outside, the world rushed by the windows. We sped past the billboard for luxury homes and the dozerbots grinding away into the earth.



The days at Sam’s house flew by. There was so much to do on Nakhon Island, so many restaurants to eat at and shops to wander in. We had promised our teachers that we’d keep up our training over the holiday, but so far, we hadn’t found time to meditate even once.

Lady Ubon had ordered a full investigation of the collapse and was away at Island Council meetings most of the time. Councilor Yurn remained confident that the tremors had nothing to do with the dozerbots or the new construction. The dozers were back to digging at full power and everyone was uneasy that an even bigger tremor might be coming soon.

But for us Novices, there were other disasters to worry about.

Like dance lessons.

“It’s one and *two* and one and *two*,” said Sifton from the side of the ballroom. He was coaching Sam and Cherry through the steps.

“That’s what I’m doing!” said Cherry. She clutched Sam’s shoulders tighter.

“You’re stepping on *one*,” said Sifton.

“Ow! She’s actually stepping on my *feet* if you’d like to know,” said Sam, bending down to rub his toes.

“Hey, it’s not my fault that your feet stick out in front of your legs!” said Cherry.

“This is so entertaining that I wish I had brought popcorn,” said Mikko, who had come over with Salan to join in the lessons.

“Here,” Sifton said to Cherry. “Let me show you.”

Sam stepped back and let Sifton take his place. As he reached out to take Cherry’s hand, she grabbed his wrist, angled her hip into his, and then flipped him over.

“Ahhh!” cried Sifton as he crashed onto the ground.

I winced. “Oh gosh, Sifton, we should’ve warned you about that.”

“I’m sorry!” said Cherry. “It’s a reflex!”

“Let’s take a small break, shall we?” Sifton groaned, rolling over onto his knees. “I’ll go ask the cook to prepare some lemonade and cookies for you. And … maybe some ice for me.”

“I feel bad for the guy,” said Cherry as he limped out of the room. “But he really should watch that unguarded left side.”

“Should we keep practicing on our own?” said Salan. “Plum, you haven’t had a turn to dance yet.”

“Ugh, no more dancing!” said Cherry. “Who’s up for wrestling?”

She eyed Mikko, who shook his head. “Come on, Cherry, we’re on vacation.”

“Why? You *scared* to lose?” said Cherry.

Mikko rolled his eyes. “To you? Never. But we can’t do it in here. There’s too much fancy stuff that could get broken.”

Cherry turned to Sam. “Is there somewhere outside we can go?”

“Hmm … Well, there’s a big empty field behind the house,” he answered. “You could transform there and tear it up as much as you want.”

“An open field sounds nice,” said Salan. “I haven’t been able to do much flying in the city.”

Cherry practically lunged for the door. “Don’t forget, Plum, big as a house this time.”

I smiled. “Maybe a *shed*.”

* * *

The five of us walked quietly through the perfectly pruned gardens surrounding Sam’s house. The land grew wilder and wilder the farther from the house we went. Even though I knew we were only a short drive away from the heart of the city, you would never have guessed that. It was so lush and peaceful, without a single building in sight.

“Sam, is *all* this land yours?” asked Cherry, whistling.

Sam blushed. “Well, I guess it belongs to our family.”

He led us to a large field of feathery grass dotted with stumps as big around as dining room tables. “Did this field used to be covered in yamyam trees?” I asked.

“The whole island used to be covered in yamyams,” said Sam. “But once we started buying food from other islands, we didn’t need them anymore. The yamyam groves were cleared out to make way for the city buildings.”

“If I were in charge here, I’d plant them back again,” I said with a sigh. When Sam looked at me, I shook my head. “I’m sorry—I’m not in charge and it’s not my place to say something like that.”

“Don’t be sorry,” said Sam. “I think about things I’d like to change on Nakhon all the time.”

“Enough talk, let’s get down to business,” said Cherry, transforming into her gillybear form.

“I guess you’re in a hurry to get beat,” said Mikko with a grin. He transformed into the field sloth and stood up tall on his back legs.

I transformed into a roan and we all leaned against one another. My antlers *zing*ed as I boosted their powers. I took a step back from them and transformed back into myself.

Salan walked over to stand beside me. “Who do you think’s going to win?”

I shrugged. “Cherry’s bigger, but Mikko has greater endurance. They’re pretty evenly matched, actually.”

“Great,” he said with a groan. “We’re going to be here all day.”

As I stood watching Mikko and Cherry grapple with each other, I played with my shell pendant, letting it bounce against my collarbone. It was warm in the field with no trees for shade. My necklace felt hot, and it was making me sweat.

The longer I held it in my fingers, the warmer it became.

“That’s weird …” I whispered to myself.

Once, in my early days on Lotus Island, I had blown a warm breath into the shell. A tiny light had appeared that spoke with my mother’s voice. That light had led me to the ancient temple where the old chants were inscribed.

Since then, I had tried countless times to reactivate the little light, but it had never come back. Something about the way the shell was as hot as a tiny coal told me that I should try again.

I cupped the shell in my hand and blew slowly into the opening.

I saw it. A tiny pinprick of light inside the shell. I held the pendant close to my face and listened.

“Plum … my dream … my wish for my Plum …”

My heart raced. It was my mother’s voice.

“Hey, Plum?” called Cherry, struggling in Mikko’s grip. “Are you sure you boosted my powers? Plum, are you even paying attention?”

The white light floated out of the shell and hovered in front of my face. And then it drifted away from me, bouncing just above the blades of grass.

I followed after it. Walking, and then sprinting to keep up. I couldn’t lose it.

“Plum?” called Cherry. “Where are you going?”

I could hear my friends running behind me, but I didn’t turn around. I had to track that light.

I raced after it across the field, past a stand of spindly trees, and over a small hill.

The ground sloped down, and the earth curved in, like a deep bowl. At the bottom of the slope, the rocks framed a dark opening. A cave.

I climbed down into the depression, following the light. The light shot inside the cave opening and disappeared into the dark.

“No!” I cried.

I turned around and saw all my friends running up behind me in their human forms. By the time they climbed down to join me, I was out of breath and crying. I tried to explain what had happened. I worried they wouldn’t believe me, but if they thought I was imagining things, they didn’t say so.

“Don’t worry, Plum, we’ll help you get your light back,” said Cherry, squeezing my hand tight. “We know it’s in the cave. Why don’t we go inside and find it?”

Mikko picked up a rusty metal cylinder that was lying near the cave mouth. “Look, someone left these old flashlamps here.” He twisted a knob on the cylinder and an orange light flickered inside. “They still have some charge too.”

“This is an old sinkhole,” said Sam, peering into the darkness. “I was told to never come here by myself when I was little.”

“Well, you’re not little anymore and you’re not by yourself!” said Cherry, hooking her arm into his.

“You think it’s safe in there?” asked Mikko.

“Wish we had Hetty here to tell us for sure,” said Salan.

Cherry wrinkled her nose. “If Hetty were here, she’d never let us go in the first place. Come on!”

We crawled after Cherry, carefully lowering ourselves down into the cave. It was quiet and dry inside. We helped one another light the

flashlamps. The entrance chamber of the cave was not very exciting. Just rough stone walls. I held my flashlamp out toward the darkness. I could make out a faint glimmery shine up ahead and a twinkle, like a twile-fly.

"There it is!" I said.

We followed the light. As we walked farther in, the cave chambers became rounder—more like tunnels. Overhead, gnarled tree roots dangled from the cave ceiling.

"Those are from old yamyam trees," said Sam. He pointed to the shriveled husks of dead yamyam fruits that hung off the roots. "They can grow straight through rock. That's why you have to use dozerbots to dig them up."

The stone walls became smoother and glimmered with a blue-purple color. It looked like someone had taken a piece of sandpaper and polished the stone until it shimmered like the inside of an oyster shell.

Mikko ran his hand along the cave wall, marveling at what he saw. "What do you think made the rock so smooth like this?"

The white light floated more slowly, like it was waiting for me catch up to it.

The light came to a stop in an enormous chamber, big enough for Sam's whole house to fit inside.

"Mother?" I whispered to the light. "Did you want to tell me something?"

The light didn't make any sound. It hovered in midair for a moment, and then it flitted back inside my shell pendant. I cupped my hand around it to keep it safe.

"You got it back!" said Cherry. "That's great, Plum!"

We all looked around the chamber. A round stone the size of Sifton's hovercoach sat in the center of the big room. The surface of the stone was rough and covered in jagged cracks. It seemed out of place in the pearly cave.

Cherry leaned against the big stone and wiped the sweat off her brow. "It's hot and I'm hungry. I could really go for an iced lime fizz and some

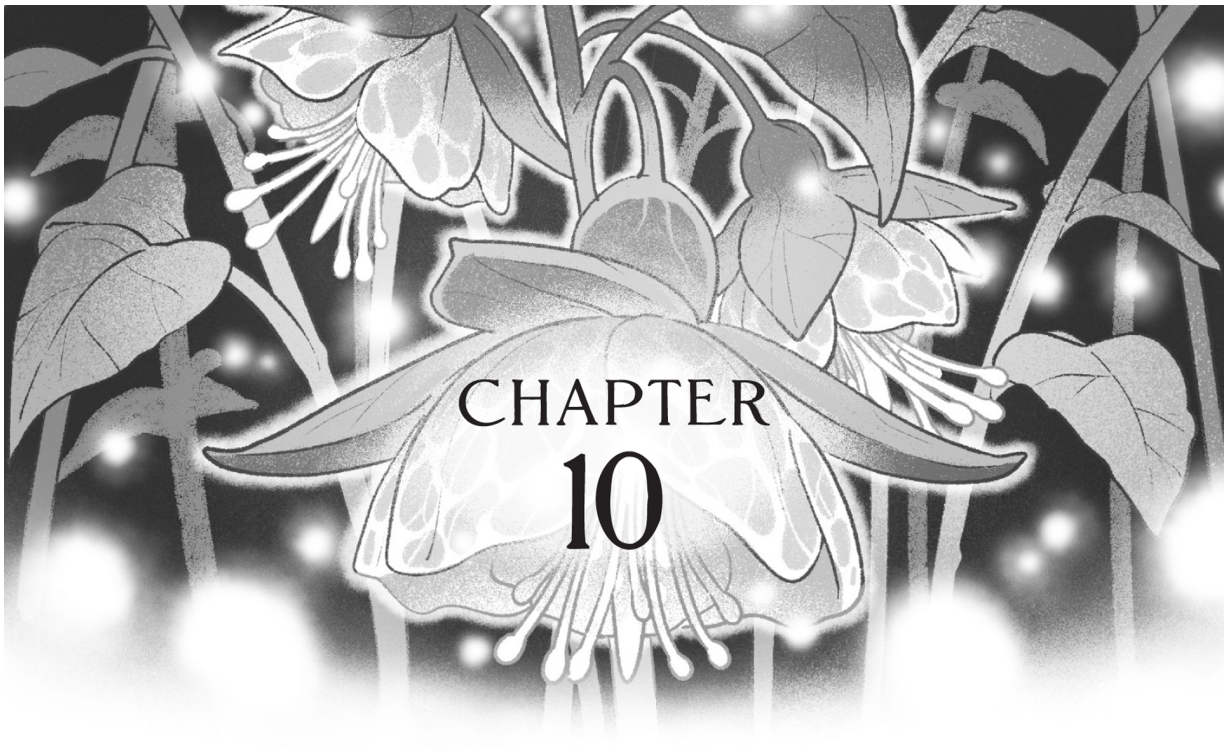
fries right now.”

Suddenly we heard a grumbling groan. Cherry put her hands to her belly. “You see? I’m so hungry you can hear my stomach!”

“Cherry, I don’t think that even your stomach grumbles that loudly …” I whispered.

The giant stone rumbled and shifted.

It wasn’t a stone at all. It was alive.



The stone shook. It rocked back and forth. Cherry ran away from it, back toward the rest of our group. On instinct, we all transformed into our Guardian forms and stood ready to run or fight.

The stone rocked again, and then it rolled sideways, straight into the cave wall. *Wham!*

The whole cave shook. Pebbles rained down on us from the ceiling.

The stone rolled against the wall of the cave, grinding into it. I recoiled from the loud, screeching sound of stone scraping against stone. The ground beneath us trembled, just like the tremors we had felt in the city.

“Let’s get out of here!” cried Mikko.

“I’ll grab the flashlamps!” said Sam. He transformed back into his human form and rushed toward a lamp. But before he could take another step, the big stone rolled backward and then slammed full speed into the

cave wall. The ground shook so hard, we were knocked off our feet. A mass of boulders fell from the ceiling, cutting us off from Sam.

“No!” I cried. I leapt to the pile of rocks and knelt on my forelegs. “Sam!”

Cherry and Mikko hurried to my side. They used their strong gillybear and field sloth arms to heave the boulders out of the way.

I tried to listen for my friend inside the rubble, but all I could hear was the loud scraping sound of the stone creature as it scuttled back and forth, grinding against the cave wall.

“Salan!” I called. “Go get help!”

Salan didn’t waste a moment. He grabbed a flashlamp in his wybird beak and flew through the darkness toward the entrance.

“We have to hurry!” I said, frantic with worry. “Sam, can you hear us?”

A muffled sound came from beneath the pile.

“I hear him!” said Mikko.

“We have to free him and then get out of here!”

“Brace yourselves, the rock is back!” called Cherry.

The stone bashed into the cave wall again and then turned and began rolling toward us, at full speed.

“Plum, for real this time—big as a house!” shouted Cherry.

I bent my antlers toward her. She held out her paw and as soon as she touched me, she grew, big, bigger, and bigger until she was almost as tall as the enormous stone creature.

She jumped in front of it and planted her back paws wide. When the stone reached her, she slammed it with her shoulder, knocking it off course.

“Come and get me now, you big rock thing!” Cherry yelled.

But the stone didn’t roll toward her. It rolled away in the other direction and slammed against the far wall of the cave.

Another shower of pebbles fell down on our heads.

“Be careful, Cherry,” shouted Mikko as he worked to move the boulders that had trapped Sam. “I don’t think that thing can see where it’s

going!”

I stared at the stone more closely. Mikko was right. It wasn’t trying to attack us. It was digging against the cave wall, trying to get *away* from us.

It was a strange creature that looked like a boulder, a tortoise, and a pill bug, all combined together. I realized that the jagged marks that I had thought were cracks in the stone were actually scales. When it moved again, it revealed a smaller round lump at the front of its body that I guessed must be its head.

The creature scraped against the cave wall, rolling faster this time. The friction sent up a cloud of fine rock dust. And now I understood that this—*thing*—was what had made the cave walls so smooth. As it ground away at the cave, the wall was getting polished to a pearly shine.

The distant echo of voices came from the cave entrance, and soon Salan flew back into the chamber, followed by a dozen beeping hoverbots. Councilor Yurn followed them, holding up a flashlamp.

“Children!” he called. “Are you all right?”

“Sam’s behind this pile of rocks!” I shouted to him. “We think he’s okay, but we have to get him out!”

Councilor Yurn started shouting orders, sending half the hoverbots to help Mikko remove boulders from the pile that had trapped Sam. The other half zipped over to join Cherry. They surrounded the big stone creature, beeping and scanning lights over its rough surface.

The stone rolled faster into the wall, like it was trying desperately to escape. The whole cave trembled with vibrations.

“I see Sam!” cried Mikko, heaving a big rock out of the way. “Sam! Give me your hand!”

Sam crawled out through the hole in the rubble. He was covered in rock dust and his glasses sat crooked on his nose.

“Sam, are you all right?” asked Councilor Yurn.

Sam coughed and wiped the dust off his face while one of the hoverbots scanned him for injuries. “I … I think I’m okay.”

Councilor Yurn turned and pointed at the stone creature, who was still trying to get away. “Immobilize that … that thing!”

“Immobilize … immobilize …” the hoverbots chirped as they advanced on the creature. Their motors made a high-pitch whir as they revved up to attack.

“Wait!” I cried out. I galloped in front of the hoverbots. I transformed back into myself and held my hands up. “Don’t hurt it!”

The hoverbots held still. The stone creature stopped moving.

“Plum, stand aside!” called Yurn. “That thing is dangerous! It must be restrained!”

“It’s alive! And I think it’s scared! Give me a chance to talk to it?” I begged. “Please?”

Sam put his hand on Yurn’s arm. “Give her a chance.”

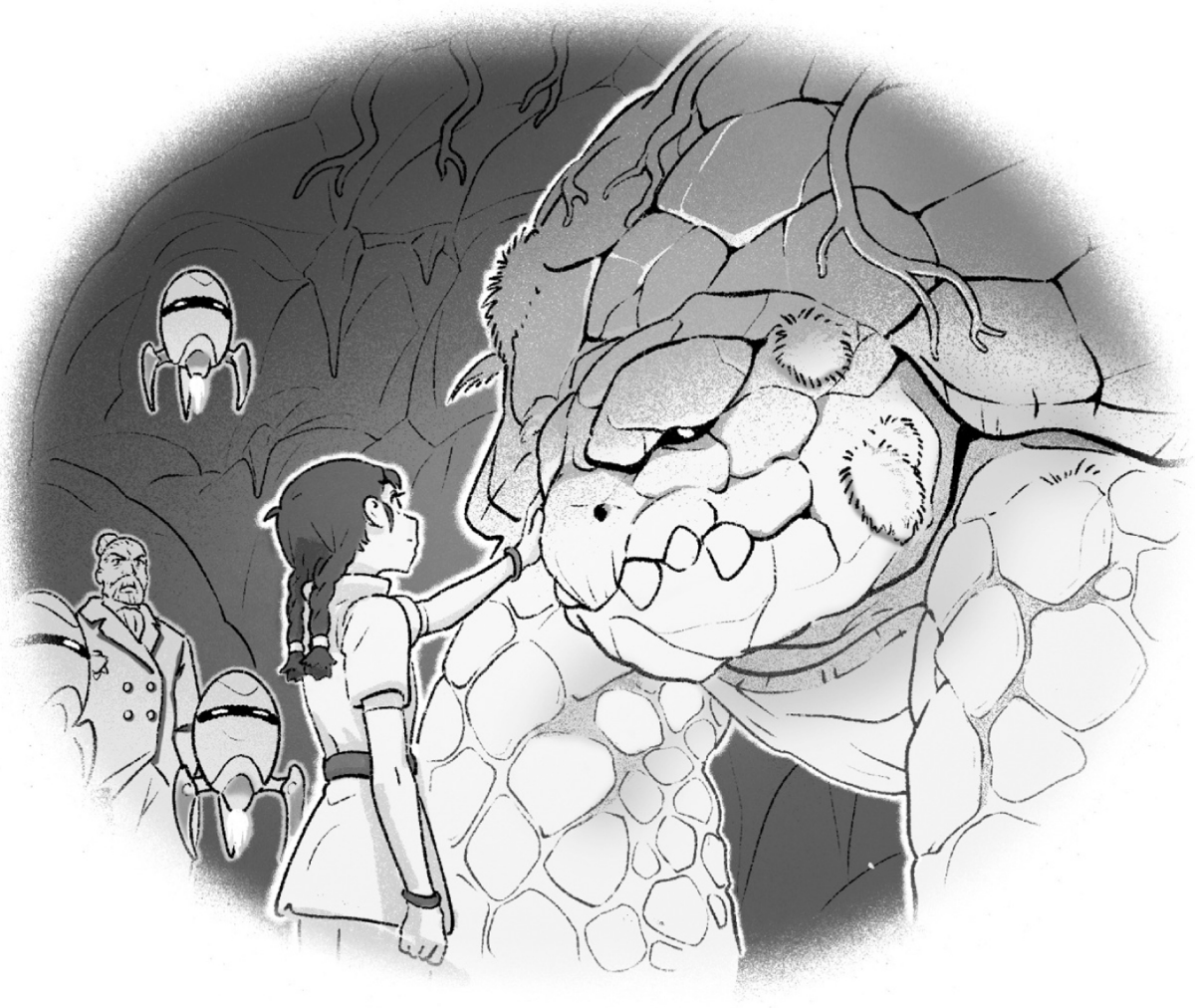
Yurn frowned, but then he nodded. He gave the hoverbots a signal to back up.

I stepped carefully toward the stone creature. It had stopped moving. The ground was still and quiet, but my whole body trembled with fear.

“I won’t hurt you,” I whispered, edging closer.

I placed my hand on the stone. Its surface was cool and craggy, as if I was touching the cave itself. But I could feel its scales rising and falling with the creature’s breath.

“Can you understand me?” I said softly. “Please. We don’t want to harm you.”



For a few long moments, the only thing I could hear was the soft echo of our breathing. Then the rock scales beneath my fingers shifted. The creature's head lifted slightly. A thick scale of stone slid back, revealing a large black eye as shiny as a beetle's back.

The creature's voice was rough and low: "Are you the one who took away the yamyams?"

Confused, I looked behind me at the others. "Did you hear what it just said?" I asked them.

Cherry looked confused. "Hear what?"

"I just heard some scratching noises," said Mikko.

I turned back to the creature. "My name is Plum, and I didn't take your yamyams," I explained. "What are … I mean, who are you? Do you have a

name?”

The creature thought about the answer for a long time. “I was given many names. Stone-chewer, cave-maker, rock-render …”

“Well, Master … um … Render, can you please tell me, are there more … stone-chewers like you?”

“I am the only one,” the creature said. He didn’t sound sad, just factual. “I have always been the only one. But tell me, if you did not take the yamyams, who did?”

I looked overhead at the shriveled tree roots poking down through the cave ceiling. “The fruits that grow from the yamyam roots—is that your food?”

“I do not have food. I do not need to eat. But I like the yamyams. I pluck them from the roots. I drink their juice. It tastes like sunshine. It tastes like the Old Home.”

The Old Home? How would this creature know what that tasted like?

“When I cannot find the yamyams, I go looking,” said the creature. “Wherever I go, I leave caves in my wake.”

I was starting to understand. “Master Render, could you please stay very still while I go speak to my friends?”

I hurried over to where Councilor Yurn and the others were waiting for me.

“Plum, did you talk to it?” asked Sam. “What did it say?”

“He feeds on the yamyams that grow underground.” I pointed up at the withered yamyam roots. “But the yamyam trees have all been cleared out or killed, so he goes tunneling through the stone, looking for new ones. I think that’s why this island has been feeling more and more tremors. It’s because he has to dig deeper and deeper into the rock to find what he wants.”

“I was right!” said Councilor Yurn. “The dozerbots didn’t cause the tremors!”

“No,” I said. “But cutting down the yamyam trees caused a big problem.”

“Well, there’s an easy fix,” said Mikko. “Just plant some more yamyams.”

Councilor Yurn shook his head. “That’s impossible. Yamyam trees take up too much land, too much space. And their roots dig too deep. They will ruin our electrical and plumbing systems. Imagine how many yamyams these creatures must eat in one day!”

“He says he’s the only one,” I said. “There are no others like him.”

“Well, then that makes him easier to take care of,” said Yurn. “Tell him that we will bring him other types of food. But he must stop digging. He must be very still.”

“Well, he doesn’t really *need* food,” I explained. “He says he likes the yamyams because they taste like sunshine.”

Councilor Yurn huffed out a laugh. “That’s ridiculous! He can’t disrupt our entire way of life just because he wants a little treat. Think of all those people living above whose lives are put in danger every time he digs a new tunnel. Tell him he’s being selfish!”

My friends and I looked at one another. I could see Councilor Yurn’s point. As Novice Guardians, we were training to protect all life on our islands. I wanted to protect this stone creature. But the humans living on Nakhon Island were also under our care. I didn’t know what to do.

The stone creature began to rock back and forth and make scraping sounds.

“Um, Plum, I think that he wants to talk to you again,” said Cherry.

I hurried to the stone creature’s side.

“I have made a decision,” said the creature. “I will leave this place.”

I blinked. “You’ll leave? Oh no, Master Render, you don’t have to do that. I’m sure we can find you some more yamyams …”

“I wanted the yamyams because I miss my old life. I miss my friends. I was holding very tight to them. But they are gone.” He made a soft shuffling sound, like a sigh. “I have stayed here too long. It is time for me to go.”

That didn’t seem fair to me. I didn’t want the creature to leave. I wanted to talk to him and ask him more questions.

“Master Render, perhaps there is some other solution—”

“I have decided,” the creature rumbled. “On the New Year, I will depart.”

His stone eyelids slid shut and he went silent. I tried to ask him more questions, but he didn’t move or answer. He had become a rock once more.

I went back to the others and explained what he told me.

Councilor Yurn clapped his hands together. “Well, that is the best news! It solves everyone’s problems.”

“How is that thing going to leave Nakhon Island?” asked Mikko. “It’s not like he can hop on a ferryboat.”

“Maybe he flies?” offered Cherry.

“I seriously doubt it,” said Salan.

“If he says he’s leaving, then it’s none of our concern how he does it,” said Yurn. “And I will set a hoverbot at the entrance to the cave to ensure that he keeps that promise.” He looked at me and quickly added, “And to make sure that no one disturbs him until he departs. Come, children. Let’s get back to the house where it’s safe.”

The others transformed back into their human forms. We picked up the flashlamps and started to follow the hoverbots back to the entrance.

“Wonderful job, Plum,” said Councilor Yurn. “Once again, you saved the day. You should feel very proud of yourself!”

Sam held his hand out to me. “Plum? Are you coming?”

I turned around to get one last look at the stone creature. I didn’t feel proud at all. I felt like something was very wrong, but I wasn’t sure what.

After our adventure with the stone creature, Sam was thoroughly checked over by Salan for any injuries. But aside from a few scratches and being covered in dust, we were all unharmed.

Lady Ubon rushed home from her meeting that night, and Councilor Yurn gave her a full report of what happened. They decided that no one else on Nakhon Island should know about the stone creature. A hoverbot guard was stationed at the entrance to the cave. Master Render would depart Nakhon Island quietly on New Year's, and things could go back to normal.

But I didn't feel normal at all.

If only I could talk to Master Render again. My necklace had led me straight into the cave. Why? There had to be some reason. Had my mother wanted me to meet him? Had she wanted me to stop the tremors?

I wished there was some way that Master Render could stay on Nakhon Island, but Councilor Yurn kept going on about how I was such a hero and had solved their tremor problem. I didn't want to prove him wrong by stirring up trouble.

Besides, everyone was completely consumed with getting ready for the New Year's party.

The next morning, Sifton knocked on our bedroom door. "Plum? I've been asked to take you to the hoverbot lab to speak to Lady Ubon."

"Me too?" asked Cherry.

"No, just Plum," said Sifton. "You and I can work on other preparations for the party. There are still so many things to go over: manners, where to stand, how to sit, and of course which spoon to use at dinner."

Cherry flopped onto her bed with a groan.

"*And* if we finish all that," added Sifton, "I may take you into the kitchen to see them wrap the lantern dumplings. The cooks are making one thousand."

Cherry sprang out of bed and landed on her feet like a grasshopper. "All right, see you later, Plum. But, Sifton, if they're making one thousand for me, how many are they making for everyone else?"

* * *

I followed the path out of the side door of the house that led to Lady Ubon's hoverbot lab. It was built right on the rocky shoreline, with great big glass windows that looked out onto the ocean below.

The front doors swung open and Lady Ubon greeted me. She was dressed simply, with her sleeves rolled up to her elbows and a pencil tucked behind her ear.

"Good morning, Plum. I have been meaning to give you a tour of my hoverbot lab, and I'm afraid today is our only chance before the big party."

"Oh yes, thank you—I'm very excited to see it."

“You’ll need this.” She handed me a thick card with some numbers printed on it. I held the card up to the hoverbot that stood at the lab entrance. It made some beeping noises and then said, “Access granted.”

Lady Ubon led me into a big hall that branched off in many directions. Different kinds of hoverbots zoomed around while people with clipboards and pencils took notes.

“This first section of my lab is the Public Safety division,” explained Lady Ubon. “Here, we work on the fire-stopper bots and the rescue teams.”

We walked on, passing a large window that looked into a sealed room. Everyone who worked inside wore full lab suits with face masks and gloves. “This is our Health division,” said Lady Ubon. “These hoverbots

are programmed to assist our island's doctors in preventing disease and helping people who are sick."

"Wow, that sounds important."

Lady Ubon smiled. "This is the work I'm most proud of. The first step to a prosperous and happy people is to keep everyone healthy."

I suddenly remembered that when Rella had left the Guardian Academy, Lady Ubon had given her a job here, in her labs. In fact, on Bokati Island, Rella had told me that it was Lady Ubon who had wanted her to cut down the Bokati trees.

But now I saw that clearly Rella had been lying. Why would Lady Ubon need Bokati wood? She had teams of engineers working on the most advanced robots ever made.

I was starting to see Lady Ubon in a whole new way. Back when I had overheard her ask Master Sunback about buying Lotus Island, I had thought she was being greedy. But now I understood that she was just trying to do the best thing for her people. She had a big job, and it didn't seem easy.

"Come, Plum, I have more to show you," she said to me.

We walked down another hall that was lined with windows that looked out onto the sea. Down below, we could see another lab building built right over the water. A dock led from the lab building to a large, floating warehouse.

"That is the boatyard, where we work on our new ships," explained Lady Ubon. "Councilor Yurn has a top secret project down there that he says he will share with me soon. But come this way, Plum. I'll show you what I'm most excited about."

She led me into a large lab where engineers worked at several different stations. "This is our Division of Invention. Some of our most useful hoverbots were first imagined in this very room."

The room buzzed with activity. Two engineers worked on a hoverbot that could filter chemicals out of dirty water.

Another group worked on a hoverbot that was programmed to rebuild itself into different shapes. With a simple command, the bot reshuffled its parts to look like a robot dog. Another command made it change its shape into the form of a rabbit.

“That’s amazing!” I said in awe.

Lady Ubon led me back into the hall.

“Plum, I haven’t thanked you enough for what you did in the cave yesterday. You saved Sam, and you helped countless others by solving that problem of the stone creature. You truly have an extraordinary gift.”

I blushed. “I’ve always had a special way with animals and plants. I’m not sure why.”

“I don’t just mean that you could talk to the creature. I mean the way you consider the welfare of all living things, including our people of Nakhon. If you hadn’t been in the cave, I doubt we would have had such a good result.”

“Thank you, Lady Ubon.”

“I will admit that when Sam was selected to go to the Guardian Academy, I was worried. I felt that his training would make him neglect his duties here. But now I see what a gift it is. He met you and all the other Novices.”

I didn’t realize it, but while we were talking, I had reached beneath my collar for my shell pendant. Lady Ubon’s eye caught it and she smiled.

“Sam told me about your necklace. He said that your mother made a wish on it for you.” She put a hand on my arm. “Plum, your mother would be so proud of you. You don’t have to worry about that one bit. And her spirit will guide you throughout your life. I see you becoming a great leader one day.”

“A great leader? Me?”

“Yes, I can see your future unfolding here, on Nakhon Island. Our people need your talents.” She looked at me closely. “Haven’t you thought about what you want to do after you graduate from the Guardian Academy? Don’t you want to do something important?”

My heart squeezed tight. Yes, of course. That was exactly what I had dreamed of.

“Let me tell you my wish,” continued Lady Ubon. “When Sam graduates, he will come back home and begin working with me, learning everything he needs to know to one day become the leader of Nakhon Island. I’d like for you to come too. And when you’re old enough, I want you to have a seat on our Island Council. Eventually you could become Lead Councilor, just like Yurn.”

“Lead Councilor?” I repeated, struggling to keep up with Lady Ubon’s grand plans. “What about Cherry? And the others?”

Lady Ubon smiled. “The more, the merrier. Together, we could all work to make everyone’s lives better. What do you think?”

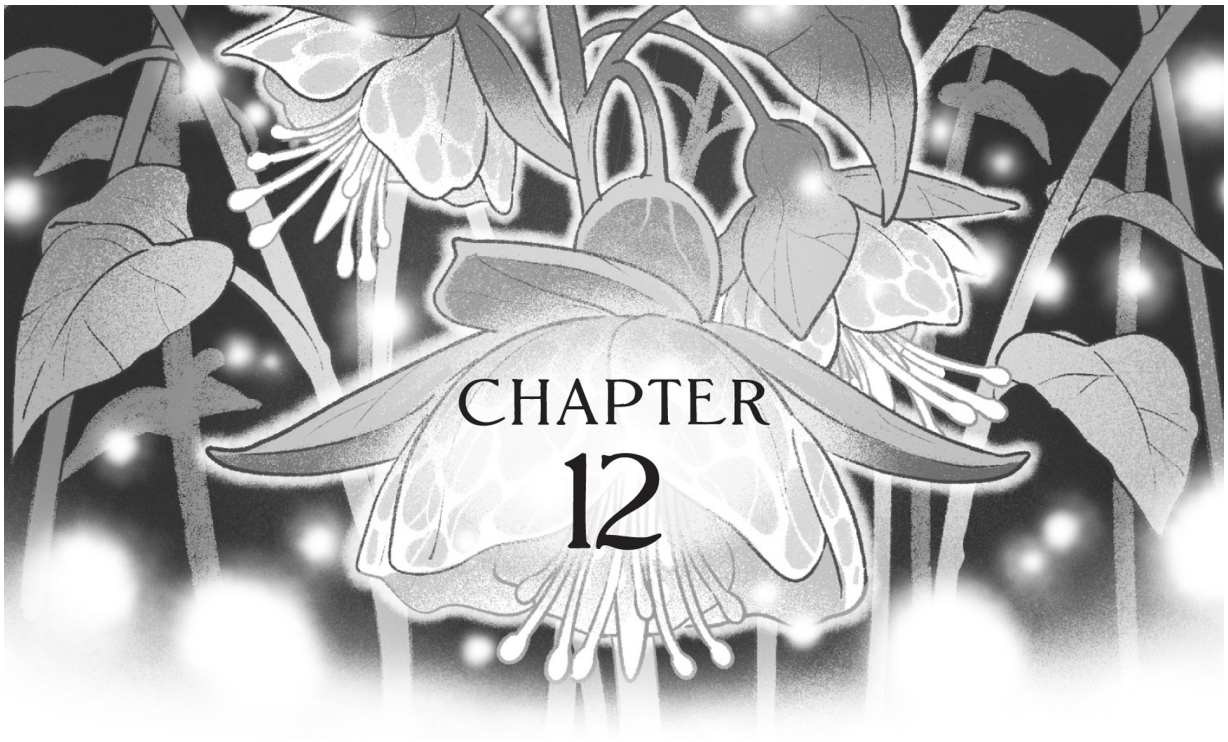
“It sounds … so incredible. But I had always imagined that after Lotus Island, I would be assigned somewhere near my home, so I could help my grandparents. They have such a big garden, and—”

“Plum, your mother made one wish for you,” said Lady Ubon. “Do you think she would have wanted her only daughter to be a simple gardener with her hands in the dirt?”

“No,” I whispered. Then I found my voice. “No, I don’t think she would have wanted that.”

“Promise me that you’ll think about your future very carefully.”

“I will. I promise.”



The next day, Sam and his mother had to go to a luncheon with the extended Ubon family, so Sifton offered to take Cherry and me to the library to visit Hetty.

As we drove down the winding driveway of the Ubon family estate, Cherry pointed to the lantern trees that lined the road.

“Those buds look like they’re just about ready to pop open,” she said.

“Councilor Yurn told me the predictor bots are sure the trees will bloom tomorrow night,” said Sifton.

I stared out my window, thinking about the future Lady Ubon had laid out for me:

A seat on the Nakhon Island Council. And one day, I could be Lead Councilor, just like Yurn. I would have the power to do big things. If I wanted to plant a thousand yamyam trees in the city, I could do it.

Cherry leaned across the seat to elbow me. “One more day, Plum! Then it’s lantern dumplings and wishes for everyone!”

I smiled. Before leaving Lotus Island, I had told Master Sunback that my wish this year was to do something big. That wish was already on its way to coming true—and it wasn’t even the New Year yet.

* * *

Sifton dropped us off in front of the library. Inside, we asked the man at the front desk if we could see Hetty. Instead, it was her father, Mister Shyu, who came out to greet us. “Hello, girls! Nice to see you again. I’m sorry, but you just missed Hetty. She went home early because she had a headache.”

“Oh, I’m sorry about that,” I said.

“But now that you’re here, perhaps you can do me a favor.” Mister Shyu asked us to wait one moment while he went to his office. When he came back, he held a thin paper tube with a carrying strap attached. “Could you deliver this to the hoverbot lab for me?”

Cherry took the tube from him. “Is this another map for Lady Ubon?”

“For Councilor Yurn, actually. He is working on something, but he didn’t say what.”

“Mister Shyu, are you sure you trust us to deliver this thing?” asked Cherry. “It looks kind of important.”

He laughed. “I do trust you, but you are right. It is important and delicate. I have only one copy in the whole library.”

Cherry saluted. “You got it, Mister Shyu.”

We thanked him and went out the back way so that Cherry could get some fried kickpeas.

While she ordered, I held the tube from Mister Shyu. I peeked inside. It looked like another map, drawn on crinkly brown paper. I had a strong desire to open the tube and look at it properly. But then I remembered what

Yurn said about me being a hero. It didn't seem very heroic to go snooping through his things without his permission.

Cherry tapped me on the shoulder. "Hey, isn't that Hetty? Her headache must be better. But why is she walking that way and not to the library?"

Hetty walked down the street with a basket tucked under her arm. She looked over her shoulder as if she didn't want to be seen.

"Hetty!" called Cherry, waving. But Hetty didn't hear her. She turned down a side street and hurried away.

"What do you think that's all about?" I asked.

"She's acting funny. Let's follow her."

We tracked her through the winding streets, up a flight of stairs and down another. But when Hetty went into a shady lane that opened up to alleyways on either side, we lost sight of her.

"Hmm, where do you think she went?" asked Cherry, popping the last of the kickpeas into her mouth.

All of a sudden, something big and furry slammed into my body from the side, rolling me onto my back on the ground.

I tried to bridge my hips and hop up so I could run away. Panting, I looked up into the slender snout of an indigo blue hare.

"Hetty!"

"I *knew* someone was following me!" she said with a twitch of her nose.

Hetty transformed back into herself and held out her hand to help me up.

"Why are you sneaking around?" she asked.

"Why are *you* sneaking around?" countered Cherry.

Hetty's basket had spilled out onto the street. Cherry and I helped her gather up her things: a book and some nut breads wrapped in tissue paper.

Cherry held up the book. "*Old Words of the Old Home*," she read out. "What is this? Are you doing homework for your dad?"

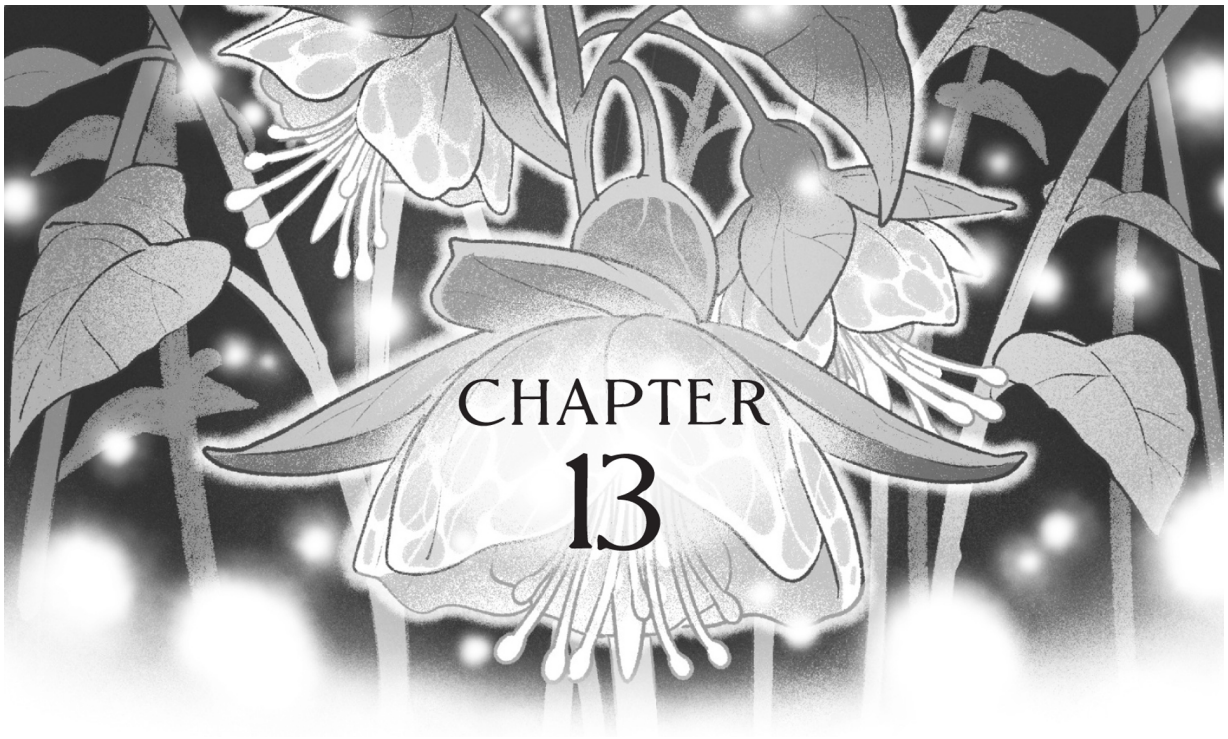
Hetty snatched the book back and looked over her shoulder. “Shh! I’m not supposed to take this out of the library.”

“So where are you going with it?” I asked.

Hetty scrunched up her nose, thinking. “Fine, I’ll tell you, but you’re not going to like it.”

Cherry and I gave each other a look. “Just tell us.”

“I’m going to see Rella.”



We followed Hetty warily through the narrow streets, up into the part of the city that had been built on the hills behind the library.

Hetty looked over her shoulder at Cherry and me. “You two look like you’re about to meet a dragon.”

“Not a dragon,” said Cherry. “The world’s sneakiest cat.” She looked up at the tall buildings. “Be on your guard, Plum. These alleys are narrow. It’ll be hard to fight back if we’re attacked by Rella in her leopard form.”

Hetty sighed. “I told you that you didn’t have to come with me.”

“Why are *you* going to see her?” I asked. “After everything she did?”

“Rella left a message for me at the library a few days ago. We met up for the first time yesterday and she asked me to come visit her at home.” Hetty stopped walking and turned to face us. “I know that Rella has done some bad things, but when my mom was sick and my dad was working all the time, she was there for me. I can’t just forget that. Besides, she hasn’t

transformed once since Bokati Island, and she stopped using her shadow powers."

"Hmph, she's probably saving them up for something really wicked," said Cherry.

"Well, this is her place." Hetty nodded at the high-rise apartment in front of us. "No one's forcing you to come with me."

Cherry and I looked at each other. A voice inside my head was telling me that this was a bad idea. But I was also so curious to see Rella and know what she had been up to.

I also wanted to know why Hetty was taking *Old Words of the Old Home* to Rella. What was she planning to do with it?

Cherry and I gave Hetty a nod. We followed her inside and up the elevator, nearly to the top of the building. When Hetty knocked on one of the apartment doors, it swung open and a small face peeked out. Then the door slammed shut again.

"Jojo, open the door!" shouted a voice from inside. The door swung open again and Rella stood in the doorway, holding a little girl on one hip. When she saw us, her face dropped. She set the little girl down and scowled at Hetty. "Why did you bring *them*?"

Hetty handed Rella the basket. "Don't be mad. They followed me from the library. Now, are you going to invite us in or not?"

For a half second, Rella's eyes flashed and I wondered if we were about to see her transform into a leopard. But then three little girls shrieked and started running in circles around her.

"Ugh, you three!" said Rella, throwing up her hands. "Go next door to Ms. Jam's to play. Right now!"

The girls ran out the door and down the hall.

Once they were gone, Rella held the door open for us. "Come in, I guess."

"There, see how polite we can all be?" said Hetty, giving Cherry a look. "I'm sure we can even make it through a whole visit without

throwing any punches.” Hetty hooked her arm into Rella’s. “Come on, show them your room. They’ll like the view.”

We left our shoes outside and walked into the apartment. We picked our way around sleeping mats stacked next to one another: two larger mats and three little ones. There was a narrow kitchen on one end, and a door to the bathroom on the other. The apartment was small and a little crowded, but spotlessly clean.

At the far end of the room, a ladder led up to a high window. Rella climbed up. We followed her and crawled out the window onto a metal balcony. A sleeping mat piled with pillows and blankets took up most of the space. Someone had secured a waterproof shade overhead. It was like a small outdoor porch just big enough for the four of us to sit cross-legged together.

Hetty was right. The view was really incredible. We were looking down the hill at the rest of the city. You could see the harbor where the boat had brought us from Lotus Island. The blue ocean sparkled in the distance.

“Rella built this whole thing herself,” said Hetty with admiration.

“Hm, pretty cool, I guess,” said Cherry grudgingly.

“Oh! I brought snacks!” Hetty reached into the basket. She pulled out the nut breads and handed Rella a bottle of children’s vitamins. “That’s from my dad.”

“Thanks,” said Rella quietly.

“So, were those little girls your sisters or something?” asked Cherry, taking a big bite out of a sugary bread roll.

Rella nodded. “I have to watch them while my parents are at work at the glass factory.”

I glanced up and saw that Rella had nailed a shelf under the roof. She had a small amount of clothes neatly folded away. I noticed that her brown

Trainee uniform from the Guardian Academy was there too.

When I first got to Lotus Island, Rella had teased me for being a dirty farm girl. I had assumed that she lived in a big, fancy house with lots of pretty, expensive clothes. She had been wrong about me. But I had been wrong about her too.

I nibbled my roll, at a loss for words. But Cherry had plenty to say for both of us.

"So, what's the deal?" she asked, leaning back. "Do you sit up here, plotting your next evil scheme?"

"I don't do much sitting at all if you want to know," Rella snapped. "And I'm going to have to find somewhere to work once the holidays are over and my little sisters can go to school."

"What happened to your job with Lady Ubon?" I asked.

Rella's eyes flashed and her nostrils flared slightly. "After that mess on Bokati Island—"

"You mean when you stole her hoverbots and started cutting down all those Bokati trees?" said Cherry.

"I didn't steal them!" shouted Rella.

"Calm. Peace," urged Hetty.

Rella took a tense breath. "I already explained this to Plum," she said. "I was given an assignment, like a challenge. Councilor Yurn told me that he was building a ship for Lady Ubon that could never sink, and he wanted me to find the perfect building material. Everyone knows that the only wood that's unsinkable is Bokati wood." She glanced at me. "I didn't think that taking a couple trees would do any harm. I know that was wrong now."

"So did Lady Ubon fire you after that?" asked Cherry.

"I didn't wait around to find out," said Rella. "It didn't matter. I was planning to quit anyway."

"If you say so," said Cherry, wiping her mouth with her sleeve. "Will you excuse me? I need to use the *facilities*. If you know what I mean."

"Come on," said Hetty. "I'll show you where the bathroom is."

They crawled back inside through the window, leaving Rella and me alone. She stared at me coldly. I had absolutely no idea what she was thinking, but one thing was certain. For whatever reason, she still hated my guts.

I nodded to the library book that Hetty brought in her basket. “You’re reading about the language of the Old Home. It has something to do with the temple chants, doesn’t it?”

Rella hesitated. Then she reached beneath her pillow and pulled out a small notebook. She showed it to me. Inside, she had written out a list:

Sail … Back … Turtle … Winter … Wing … Roan … Spindle … Hoof

“Roan?” I whispered. “But that’s my Guardian form.”

“I’ve been using books from the library to try to translate the chants,” said Rella. “It’s hard. This is all I was able to do, and I don’t even know if it’s right.”

“Why are you doing this? So you can use the chants to be more powerful?”

“No. I’m done with all the Guardian stuff,” she said quickly. “Done with transforming. It’s only brought me trouble.”

I highly doubted that. “So why are you still so obsessed with the chants, then?”

Rella bit her lip like she was trying to decide how much to tell me. “When I was working for Lady Ubon, I spent a lot of time in the hoverbot labs. I know this sounds strange, but the hoverbots were *listening* to me whenever I spoke the chants. I think they recorded my voice.”

“But why would they do that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they’re using the chants in their code somehow. That’s why I decided to quit. Because it felt wrong. But now I want to find out what the chants mean. I want to know what I gave them.”

I thought back to when I toured the lab with Lady Ubon. None of the hoverbots had been speaking chants. How would that even work? Rella was way off.

“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about,” I told her. “Sam always says that the hoverbots only do what their programming tells them.”

Rella huffed. “Sam is a spoiled baby, and he hardly ever sets foot in his mom’s lab.”

I sat up straight. “He is not! And he knows that everything his mom does is to help her people.”

Rella leaned closer to me. “Listen, Plum, I know how easy it is to get wrapped up in Lady Ubon’s grand plans. I did that too and look where it got me.”

My face flushed hot and I scooted away from her. “How dare you say that about her? And how dare you pretend to be looking out for me? You’ve never been anything but awful to me! You are a selfish person, and I’m glad that you’re never coming back to the Guardian Academy!”

Just then, Cherry popped her head out the window.

“Well, it’s been a lovely visit, but we need to get going,” she said. “Come on, Plum, we have a party to prepare for, and I have a jumpsuit to try on.”

Rella looked at me once more with cold eyes, then turned away. “Hetty can let you out.”

I couldn’t get out of there fast enough. I was mad at Hetty for coming here. Mad at myself for coming along. Most of all, I was mad at Rella for trying to put down good people who were trying to do good things.

I was not going to let her poison my relationship with Lady Ubon. She was just jealous of me and Sam and the other Novices. Well, Rella might have ruined her own future, but I would not let her ruin mine. Not when all my wishes were so close to coming true.

Councilor Yurn’s predictor bots had done a good job. By the next morning, the lantern blossoms had already started to crack. They would be open by midnight.

I got dressed quietly, leaving Cherry to snore away. I had decided that she was finally going to have her morning to sleep in.

I had a stone to talk to.

The morning was wet and the dew on the grass soaked into my pants cuffs as I crossed the old yamyam field behind Sam’s house. When I arrived at the entrance to the cave system, there was one hoverbot guarding it, the same kind that Lady Ubon had stationed at the entrance to her lab.

“Access restricted,” it chirped.

I took out the card that Lady Ubon had given me in the lab and swiped it over the front of the bot.

"Access … granted."

I stepped inside the cavern and lit my flashlamp. Carefully I made my way deeper into the cave passages. I found Master Render in the same spot as before. He looked exactly like a big, lumpy rock. I thought he must be asleep.

But then he shifted. "I heard you coming," he said in his gravelly voice. "I can smell the lantern trees. Tonight is the New Year. The night for my departure."

"Master Render, I feel so bad that you have to leave your home. Is there some way to arrange it so that you can stay?"

"This is not my home," he said. "My home is across the sea."

I remembered what he had said about the yamyam fruits tasting like the Old Home. Could it be possible that this stone creature was even more ancient than he appeared?

"Master Render, did you come here with the Great Beast from the Old Home all those years ago?"

"Yes, the Great Beast was my friend. I had many friends long ago. We had to leave them behind."

"Leave them behind? But I thought that when the Great Beast swam here, he brought all the creatures of the Old Home with him?"

"He tried. But there was not enough room on his back for all. And so the strongest creatures, my friends, volunteered to stay behind. I could swim and so I followed the Great Beast."

"What happened to your friends that stayed behind?" I asked.

"I don't know. I think it's time for me to return and find out."

I felt so sad. Here was a creature so old that he knew the Great Beast. And now he was going to be lost to us again.

I tried to ask him as many questions as I could about the Old Home. He told me about the yamyam forest where he was born.

“It was beautiful. The yamyams and the sunshine. I made so many tunnels under the roots. I had many friends who visited me in my caves.”

I tried to ask him what happened to the Old Home and how it was destroyed, but Master Render only answered my questions partway. He spoke in circles and everything always came back to the yamyams.

“They taste just like sunshine,” he said again. “They smell like dew.”

My flashlamp flickered. People would be getting ready for the party soon and they would wonder where I was. I had a thousand more questions, but one of them mattered the most.

I touched the shell pendant around my neck.

“Master Render, did you ever meet a girl who came down here to see you? A girl who looked a little like me?”

“Yes. You are a girl who looks like you, and you came to see me.”

I sagged a little. A part of me had hoped that my necklace had led me into the cave because my mother had visited it before. But there must have been some other reason. Maybe the spirit of my mother had wanted me to help the people of Nakhon by solving the problem of the tremors.

“You are my friend,” said Master Render. “What is your name?”

I smiled. “Plum.”

“Plum, I will remember you after I leave.”

I stood and picked up the flashlamp. “I will remember you forever, Master Render.” I turned to go but then stopped. “But tell me one more thing? How will you get to the Old Home? It’s so far away.”

“I will go back the same way I came. I will swim. I will take the Old Road.”

I felt a jolt go through me. My shell necklace tingled. When I was on Bokati Island, I had asked old Master Em to use his powers of intuition to give me a vision of my future. He had said:

I see you traveling an ancient road. You are following in the path of the Great Beast.

“Master Render, what is the Old Road?” I asked.

“When we left the Old Home, we had to swim. The ocean is so big. But there are parts of the ocean where the water runs fast, like a river.”

“Do you mean an ocean current?”

Master Render thought for a moment. “Yes, I think that is right. The Great Beast knew of a *current* that wrapped around the whole world. He called it the Old Road. When we found it, we did not have to swim so much. We could ride.”

So the Old Road was an ocean current. That meant that Master Em’s vision for me must have been a mistake. I couldn’t swim along a current in the ocean!

“The Great Beast was so tired,” continued Master Render. “He carried so many friends on his back. And he could not swim very well because he held something in his hand.”

“What did he hold? Do you know?”

But the stone creature was back to speaking in circles again. “I do not have hands, so I carried my treasure in my mouth. Do you know what it was?”

I smiled. “A yamyam?”

He tilted back and forth happily. “Yes! Have you tried them? They taste like sunshine!”

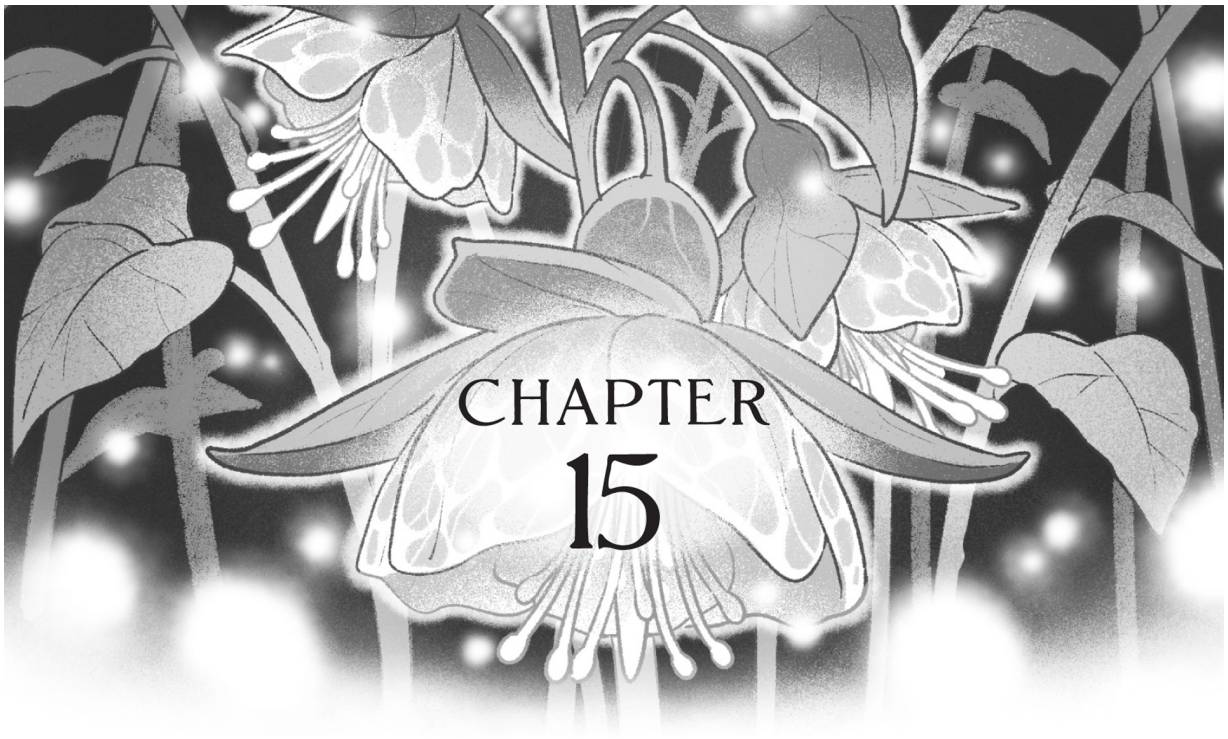
My flashlamp had nearly burned down. I had stayed too long already.

“Master Render, I’m sorry, but I have to go now. Thank you for talking to me. I wish you the best for your journey.”

I placed my hand on his side. I felt his stony scales rise and fall slowly. We stayed there in silence for a moment, and then I left him.

As I made my way out of the chamber, I looked one more time at Master Render.

He was still and silent as a stone.



Check this out! Ha! Ha!” said Cherry, kicking her leg up high. The green fabric of her jumpsuit shone in the lamplight. “Wow, Madam Darning really came through with this thing. I bet I could even do a—” She stopped and gasped as she turned to face me. “Holy celery, Plum! Look at you!”

I spun around slowly in front of our mirror. The midnight-blue fabric of my dress fanned out like flower petals.

There was a soft knock at the door and Lady Ubon peeked her head in. She was wearing a crimson ballgown. “My goodness, girls, you both look enchanting!”

She walked up to me and put her hands on my shoulders, standing behind me in the mirror.

“Do you like your dress, Plum?”

I couldn’t stop smiling. “I love it.”

“I have something for you.” Lady Ubon pulled out a small object from her dress pocket and handed it to me.

It was a tiny yamyam fruit.

“Sam told me what you said about wanting to plant more yamyam trees,” said Lady Ubon. “I think it’s a promising idea. After you graduate from the Academy, I hope I get to hear more of your ideas.”

I slipped the yamyam into my dress pocket and hugged her. Cherry hugged her too, and we all laughed.

“Now, come downstairs,” said Lady Ubon. “The high society of Nakhon Island is dying to rub elbows with you.”

The party was more spectacular than I could have imagined. The downstairs ballroom was packed with people from all over Nakhon dressed in their finest clothes. Hoverbots wove among the crowd carrying trays of delicious food and fizzing drinks.

Hetty was there in a lovely pink dress and Salan and Mikko looked very dapper. We all stood together chatting.

Cherry frowned as she looked around. “None of these waiter bots have lantern dumplings on their trays. There was supposed to be a thousand of them!”

On the stage, a band started to play, and two singers began crooning out New Year’s songs. People started to dance.

“This is my favorite song!” said Hetty, pulling Salan and Mikko toward the middle of the floor.

Cherry followed them. “I did make our dance instructor tap out, so you have been warned.”

“Ahem, may I?” said a voice behind me.

I turned to see Sam. “Oh my goodness! Look at you all dressed up!”

“Look at *you*,” he said. “Where’s that girl that talks to the earthworms? Have you seen her?”

I laughed as we joined the others. The song was made for a group dance, and the six of us bowed to one another and held hands in a circle.

As we followed the dance steps, the other dancers around us cleared out of the way. I could hear the partygoers talking as they watched us.

“Look at those Novices! Aren’t they just lovely!” said one person.

“I never thought Nakhon Island should have Guardians, but now I’m changing my mind,” said another.

The six of us beamed and turned through the dance steps while all eyes were on us.

“The New Year is almost here!” said Hetty, leaning into the circle. “What are you all going to wish for?”

Cherry was still scanning the crowd. “I was going to wish for a thousand lantern dumplings, but right now I’d settle for *one*. Is that too much to ask for?”

I smiled. My heart was so full. I felt like all my wishes were on the edge of coming true. Everything was right here, in this beautiful ballroom, with my friends, and a big, bright future laid out for me.

As I spun, I whispered to my necklace, “Your wish and my wish, Mother. They’re going to come true together. I know it.”

Suddenly we heard the people around us gasp and murmur. Then someone at the edge of the room said, “It’s happening! The lantern blossoms are starting to open!”

We followed the crowd out of the ballroom and toward the courtyard. Sure enough, the delicate papery buds of the lantern trees had begun to crack open. The twile-flies in the courtyard blinked on and off, on and off.

Sam looked around. “Where’s my mother? She should be here!”

“You stay and be a good host,” I said. “Cherry and I will go find her and bring her back in time.”

Cherry and I left the courtyard and hurried down the hallway. We passed Sifton. “Have you seen Lady Ubon?”

“Have you tried her office?”

We raced down the hall to Lady Ubon’s office. The door was slightly open and the lights were on inside.

When I knocked on the door, it swung open farther. “Lady Ubon? The lantern trees are opening up early! You don’t want to miss it …”

Her desk lamp was on, but the room was empty.

Cherry gasped and ran toward the desk. “Dumpling jackpot! Yes!”

One of the hoverbots must have dropped off a dish of lantern dumplings and a cup of tea for Lady Ubon. The dumplings were still steaming.

“You don’t think she’d mind if I just took one, right?” said Cherry, already dipping it into the sauce bowl. “I mean there *are* a thousand, and—oops!”

A glob of sauce dripped onto one of the papers on the desk.

“Cherry! Oh no, here let me get that.”

I hurried to blot it up with the napkin. The sauce had fallen on a letter that looked important.

Lady Ubon,

I am pleased to finally send you the plan I have been working on these many months. The Department of Invention says their new form-changing bots are ready to deploy. With your permission, we will make the preparations to launch in the New Year. As we have discussed many times, the needs of the people of Nakhon Island must be met.

Signed,
Councilor Yurn

A launch? Form-changing bots? What could this be about?

Beneath the letter was a sheet of crinkled brown paper. I recognized it as the document that Mister Shyu had asked us to deliver to Councilor Yurn.

It was a map of Lotus Island.

It showed details of the reefs and bays along the shore. Little notes taped to the map labeled parts of the island *Landing Site* and *Building Site*.

“Building site?” said Cherry, leaning over to look closely. “On Lotus Island? What does that mean?”

I slid the map to the side. Beneath it was a diagram of a large sailing ship. The ship had a huge flat deck on top that held dozens of machines.

“Are those hoverbots?” asked Cherry.

“They’re dozerbots,” I said. “Like the ones being used to clear the yamyam trees.”

Cherry snorted and stuffed another dumpling in her mouth. “Ha! You can’t put that many dozerbots on a ship! They’re too heavy. That boat would sink right to the bottom of the sea!”

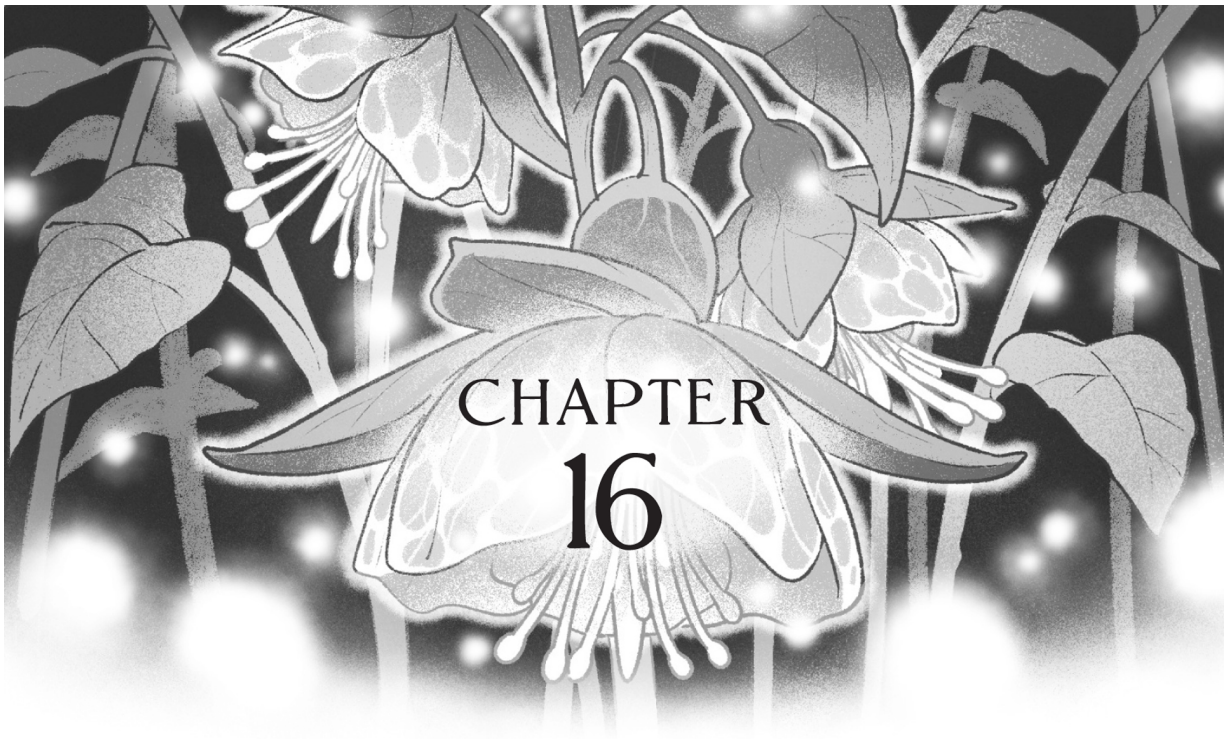
My heart was pounding so fast, I wondered if Cherry could hear it.

Rella's words drummed in my brain.

Councilor Yurn told me he needed to build a ship for Lady Ubon that could never sink.

I don't know what's going on there, but it's not good.

"Cherry, we have to get down to the lab."



Cherry and I raced down the stairs and out the back door. All the house staff and hoverbots were busy with the party and no one saw us as we ran through the garden toward Lady Ubon's lab. All around us, twile-flies flickered in the air. The lantern trees would bloom very soon.

I led Cherry around the backside of the lab. I pointed out the large boathouse on the water.

"Look there." The moonlight illuminated twenty dozerbots lined up on the beach next to the boathouse. There were other machines too. Drilling-bots and saw-bots, and other contraptions that could crush and cut. They were all massive, much too heavy to hover off the ground.

"What's all that for?" asked Cherry.

"I think all those bots are waiting to be loaded onto a boat," I said.

"But they're much too big to carry on one boat."

I put my hand on her arm. “Rella told me that Councilor Yurn wanted to make an *unsinkable* ship. That’s why she took the trees from Bokati island. And he has been working on a secret project down there in that boathouse.”

“Plum, you can’t believe a word Rella says …”

“Think about it. Lady Ubon tried to buy Lotus Island, but Master Sunback wouldn’t sell it. She asked Hetty’s father for maps of other islands, but they must not have found any that were big enough to build on. And then Councilor Yurn asked Mister Shyu for a map of Lotus Island. The Councilor needed it so he could figure out where to land a ship and unload all those bots. He’s going to invade Lotus Island!”

“The Guardians would never let that happen!” said Cherry.

But even as she said it, we both knew that there were no Guardians around to protect Lotus Island. Everyone had gone home for the New Year. Master Sunback was alone.

“Come on,” I said. “We have to get inside that boathouse. We have to figure out how to stop this.”

We crept quickly down the hill to the dock that led out to the boathouse. A sentry bot stood guard at the big metal door. I pulled out the access card Lady Ubon had given me.

“Access … granted,” it beeped.

We swung open the door and went inside.

Before I flicked on the light, I could smell it: the sharp scent of Bokati wood mixed with fresh paint.

“Holy fern fronds,” whispered Cherry as the lights blinked on.

An enormous wooden ship floated in the water before us. It took up the entire length of the boathouse. It had a wide, flat deck. Plenty of room to carry all the machines we had seen on the beach and more.

“Do you think Lady Ubon knows about this?” asked Cherry. “Should we go tell her?”

I bit down on my lip. I felt that Councilor Yurn had been working on this plan in secret, without Lady Ubon’s approval. But I couldn’t be sure

how Lady Ubon would react when she found out. She was desperate to find more land to expand Nakhon's cities. Would she stop Yurn? I couldn't be sure.

"Honestly, Cherry, I don't know who to trust anymore. I just know that Yurn is going to try to carry out this plan right away while everyone is caught up in the New Year's celebrations. We have to act fast."

Cherry nodded. She pointed to a huge rolling door at the opposite end of the boathouse. "Make me big enough that I can open that door. Yurn can't launch his boat if we launch it first."

Before I could transform into my roan form, we heard someone running toward us. The sentry bot beeped out a warning and then we heard a big splash. The boathouse door swung open and Hetty, Mikko, and Salan burst in.

"There they are!" said Salan.

"How did you find us?" I asked.

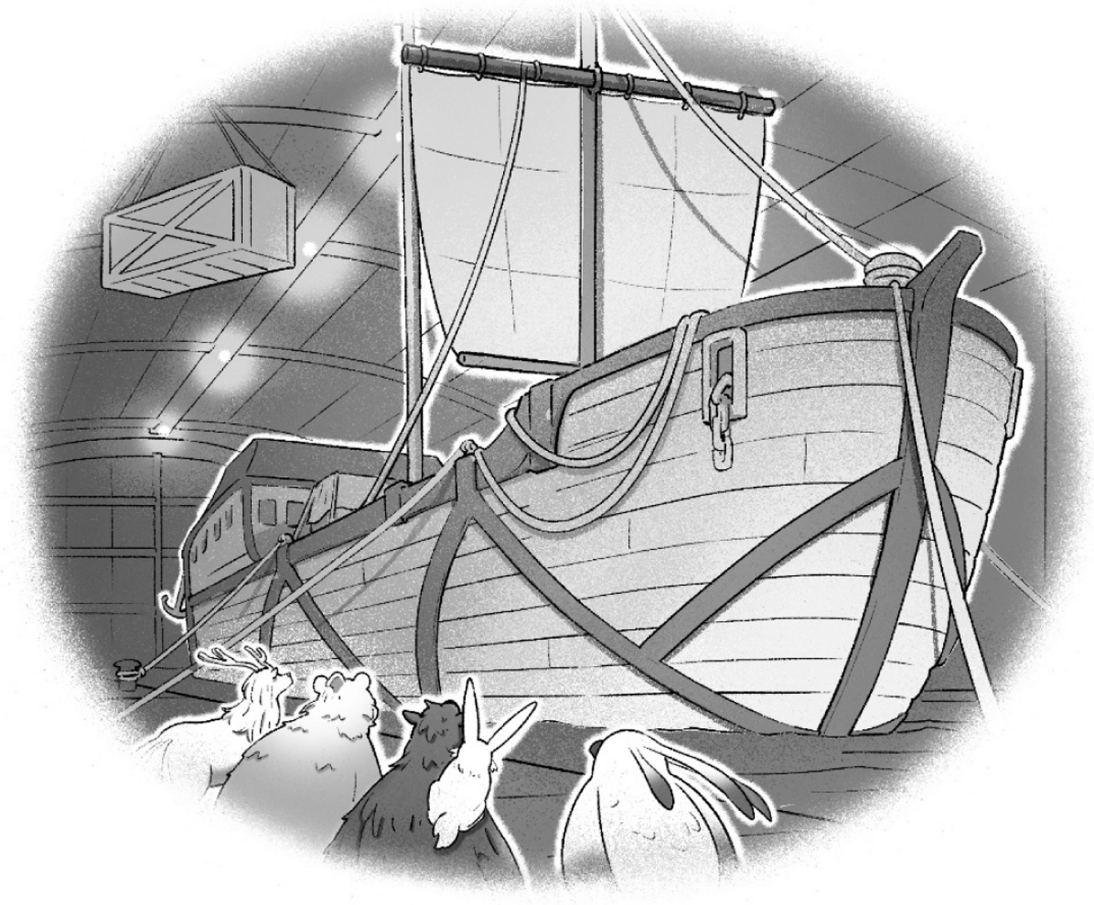
"Hetty sensed that you were in danger and Salan tracked you down," said Mikko.

Hetty wrung her hands. "We're probably in much more danger now that Mikko threw that sentry bot into the water! What is going on, Plum?"

I explained things to them as quickly as I could. They all agreed to help us right away.

"We have to hurry though," said Salan. "While everyone is still waiting on the lantern trees to bloom."

We all transformed into our Guardian forms. Cherry worked on rolling open the huge door that led out to the sea while the rest of us untied the ropes securing the boat to the dock. When the rolling door was open, we all pushed the ship away from the dock. Even though it was huge, it was incredibly light. With just one coordinated shove, it began to float toward the open door.



Hetty, who stood outside as lookout, hopped back in, her long ears swiveling back and forth. “Someone’s coming!”

We looked around in panic. There was nowhere to run.

We heard expensive shoes click across the wooden dock. And then Councilor Yurn stepped into the boathouse. He was followed by five shining hoverbots. His face twisted up with rage when he realized the Bokati-wood ship was floating out to sea.

“What are you doing?” he shrieked at us. “My ship! Bring it back immediately!”

“That ship is not yours,” said Salan. “It’s made of stolen Bokati wood!”

“This is all a misunderstanding,” said Councilor Yurn, trying to regain his composure.

“We understand what’s going on perfectly well,” said Mikko, folding his arms.

Councilor Yurn addressed me. “Plum, please. Surely you aren’t a part of this. Lady Ubon has told me about her big plans for you after your graduation. If you bring back the ship, I won’t tell her you were involved. You don’t want to ruin your chances to serve on the Island Council, now do you?”

“We saw *your* plans,” said Cherry. “The map of Lotus Island. The diagram of this ship.”

“I can explain everything,” urged Yurn. “Just calm down and come back to the house so that we can discuss this. Please. We haven’t even finished the New Year’s party!”

I imagined transforming back into myself and walking back to the house in my beautiful dress to the party. I imagined speaking calmly to Councilor Yurn and Lady Ubon. Maybe I could talk to them about giving up their desire to own Lotus Island. But did a desire that strong go away so easily?

Wanting something—wanting it with your entire heart—could make you forget everything else that was important. I should know. I had wanted to create a big, bright future for myself so badly. I had gotten caught up in dreams of being a famous leader on Nakhon Island. I had ignored so many warning signs. I had let Lotus Island fall into danger.

“No,” I said firmly. “We will not discuss anything with you, and you will not take this ship anywhere.”

“Then you leave me no choice.” Councilor Yurn’s lips curled angrily. “Stop them!” he shouted to the bots. “Bring back that ship!”

Cherry stepped forward along the dock. We all moved to flank her.

“You’ll have to get past me first,” she said with a gillybear growl.

Councilor Yurn glared at her. “That won’t be a problem.”

He snapped his fingers and the hoverbots glided toward us.

Mikko swung his field sloth arms as he took a step forward. “We’re not afraid of bots. We’ve fought them before.”

“Not bots like this,” said Yurn. He snapped his fingers again.

The hoverbots began chirping out a string of strange words. Their mechanical voices sounded like nonsense, but there could be no mistaking it. They were speaking the ancient chants from Lotus Island, the same words that had given Rella her powers.

I remembered what she had told me:

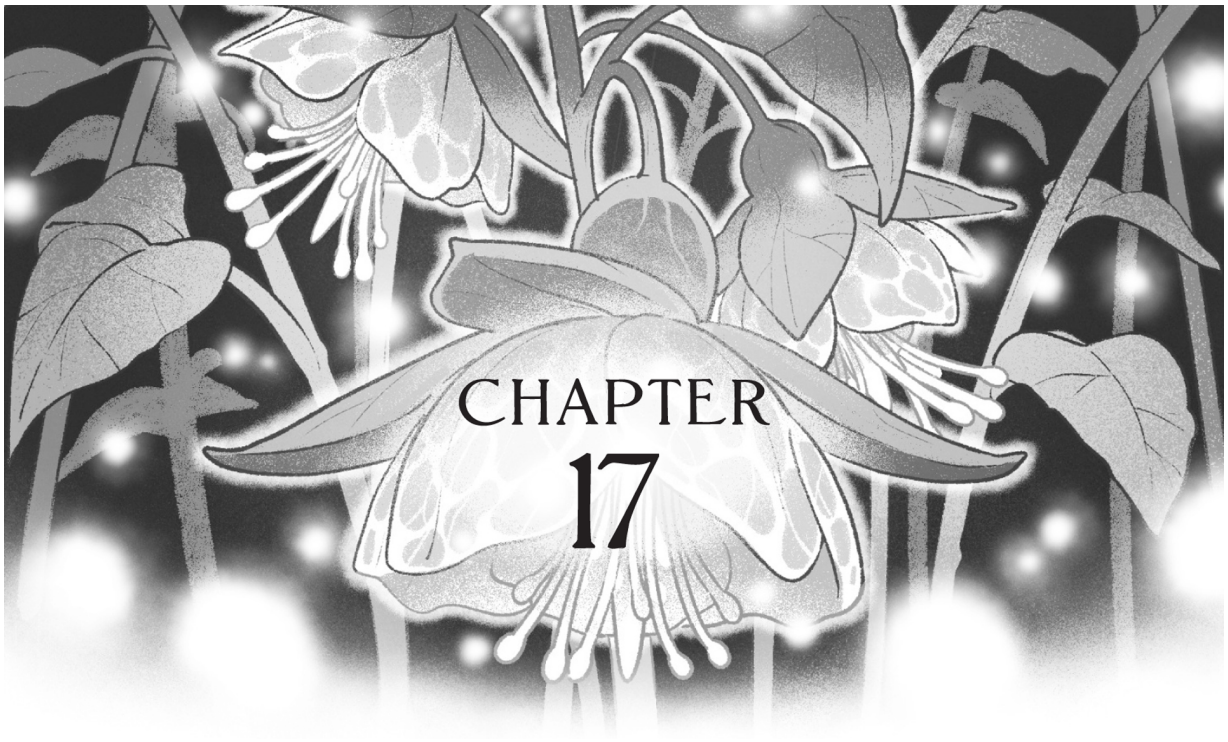
The hoverbots were listening *to me. They’re using the chants in their code somehow.*

“No …” I whispered. “It’s not possible.”

The hoverbots’ metal bodies shifted and rearranged. They were just like the shape-shifting bots I had seen in the Invention lab. But these were far more advanced. As they spoke the chants, their limbs grew and changed shape, reassembling into different forms: claws, wings, antlers.

We all gasped and shrank away from them.

The hoverbots were becoming mirror images … of us.



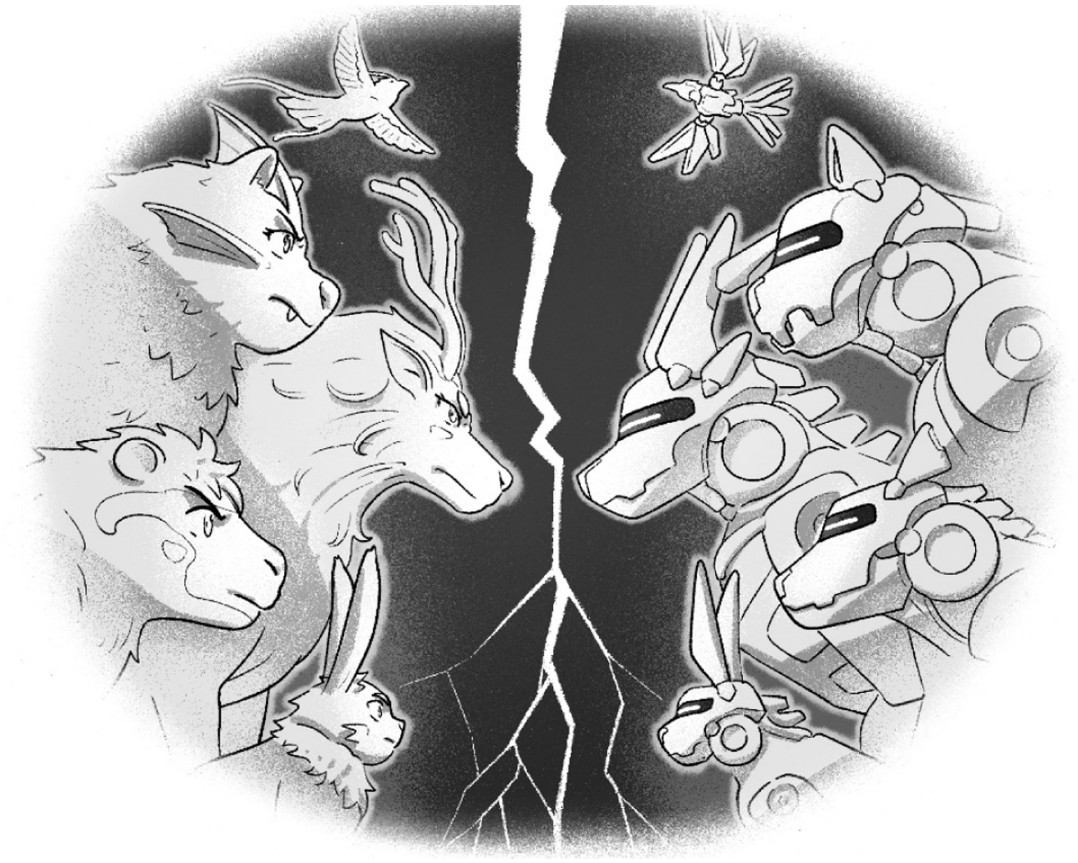
I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Each of the hoverbots had shifted their shapes to mimic our Guardian forms. I stared at the mechanical roan that stood on the dock, facing me. It lowered its head and stamped one metallic hoof.

Suddenly it reared back on its hind legs and charged straight into me. I lowered my antlers just in time to take the shock.

WHAM!

The roan-bot slammed its head against mine. Stars flashed at the edges of my vision as I staggered back.

I glanced up. The other hoverbots had singled out my friends. Each Novice grappled with a robotic version of themselves. Mikko rolled and slid beneath a mechanical field sloth. Hetty dodged the kicks of a silver hare-bot. Overhead, a screeching robotic wybird swooped and dived after Salan.



I shook my head and blinked hard. *Focus.* The roan-bot charged at me again. This time I steadied myself, braced my legs in a wide stance, and took a deep breath. When the bot slammed into me, I exhaled with a "*Ha!*" I twisted my neck, locking our antlers together.

I continued to breathe as our antlers clacked against each other. Inch by inch, I shifted my weight, getting myself into a better and better position. With one strong twist, I could defeat this bot. I could feel it.

Breathe. Stay present. Return to your foundations.

I waited, conserving my energy but never letting the bot gain the advantage. And then I felt it. The bot was shifting its stance to take me down. For a split-second, it raised one leg off the ground. This was my moment.

I twisted my neck, using all my leverage to knock the robotic roan off-balance. It teetered and slammed onto its back.

Mikko was nearby, grappling with the sloth-bot. “Plum! Take out its control panel!” he shouted. “On its chest!”

Before the roan-bot could stand up, I transformed back into myself. I reached down and ripped off the small metal door on the bot’s chest. I looked down into a nest of wires and flashing lights. I snatched out the wires, snapping them in half.

Inside the roan-bot, I heard a motor’s dying whir. The bot collapsed into a pile of useless metal.

Out of breath, I looked around for my friends. They were each locked in combat, evenly matched against the bots. But I knew that while my friends’ energy couldn’t last forever, the bots would never get tired. But we had one advantage they did not.

Cherry grunted with effort as she wrestled a robotic version of herself.

“Cherry!” I called to her. I transformed again into my roan form and leapt to her side.

She shot her paw out to me and we connected. Instantly she began to grow until she dwarfed the gillybear-bot. Easily she flipped it over onto its back, pinned its arms, and ripped out its control panel.

“Ha!” she cried. “Not big as a house, Plum, but good enough!”

I hurried to Hetty and boosted her powers. She could sense the hare-bot’s attacks long before they struck. With Cherry’s help, they knocked the bot over and shut it down.

Salan swooped low over me, just long enough for me to touch his wing. He flew faster and more agile. With a whirl of blue feathers, he knocked the wybird-bot out of the air, and it landed in the water beside the dock, sinking straight to the bottom.

But as I tried to get to Mikko, I heard Councilor Yurn blow a whistle at his neck. A fleet of twenty ordinary hoverbots zoomed through the boathouse door and surrounded me. I couldn’t get close enough to Mikko to touch him.

Mikko was struggling in his fight against the robotic field-sloth. His Guardian power was endurance, but he had been fighting too long. Without

my help, his energy would give out.

The sloth-bot reared its blocky fist back, aiming a blow straight for Mikko's face.

"Mikko!" I cried.

Before the punch could land, the bot was tackled by a large mass of gray fur. Everything moved so fast, it took me a moment to realize that the bot was fighting an enormous wolfhund.

"Sam!" we all cheered.

Sam and Mikko pinned the robotic field sloth down. Mikko ripped open its front panel and pulled out the wires. The hoverbot went limp beneath them.

Panting, Sam turned to face Councilor Yurn. Yurn raised his hand to snap his fingers again but held still. He knew that hurting Sam was off-limits. Instead, he gave a short blow on his whistle, and the twenty hoverbots zipped to his side. They floated inches over the dock, ready to obey his commands.

"This stops right now," Sam said forcefully. "When my mother learns what you've done, your career will be over."

Yurn put on an overly sweet smile. "Sam, how can you say such a thing? Everything I've ever done has been for Nakhon, and that's exactly what your mother wants."

Sam opened his mouth to speak but snapped it shut again. Maybe he wasn't sure what his mother wanted.

"Oh, maybe we'll have to pause my plan until you children forget about things and move on," Yurn continued. "But in the end, you'll see. Lady Ubon knows that taking over Lotus Island is the only way to give the people of Nakhon Island what they want. It may take longer, but my plan will be carried out."

Now Yurn did raise his hand and snap his fingers, but the fleet of hoverbots didn't attack us. Instead, they glided through the air to the Bokati-wood ship. They escorted the ship back into the boathouse, to its original place along the dock.

We all leapt onto the deck of the ship and tried to push it away from the dock, back out to sea. But the hoverbots flew to the rear of the ship and released a heavy iron chain. A massive anchor dropped over the side, sinking down into the water.

“No!” cried Cherry.

Councilor Yurn smiled. “My ship isn’t going anywhere. Not yet at least.”

My whole body ached. My limbs were cold, and my antlers felt heavy.

The chill in the air grew sharper and the lights in the boathouse dimmed.

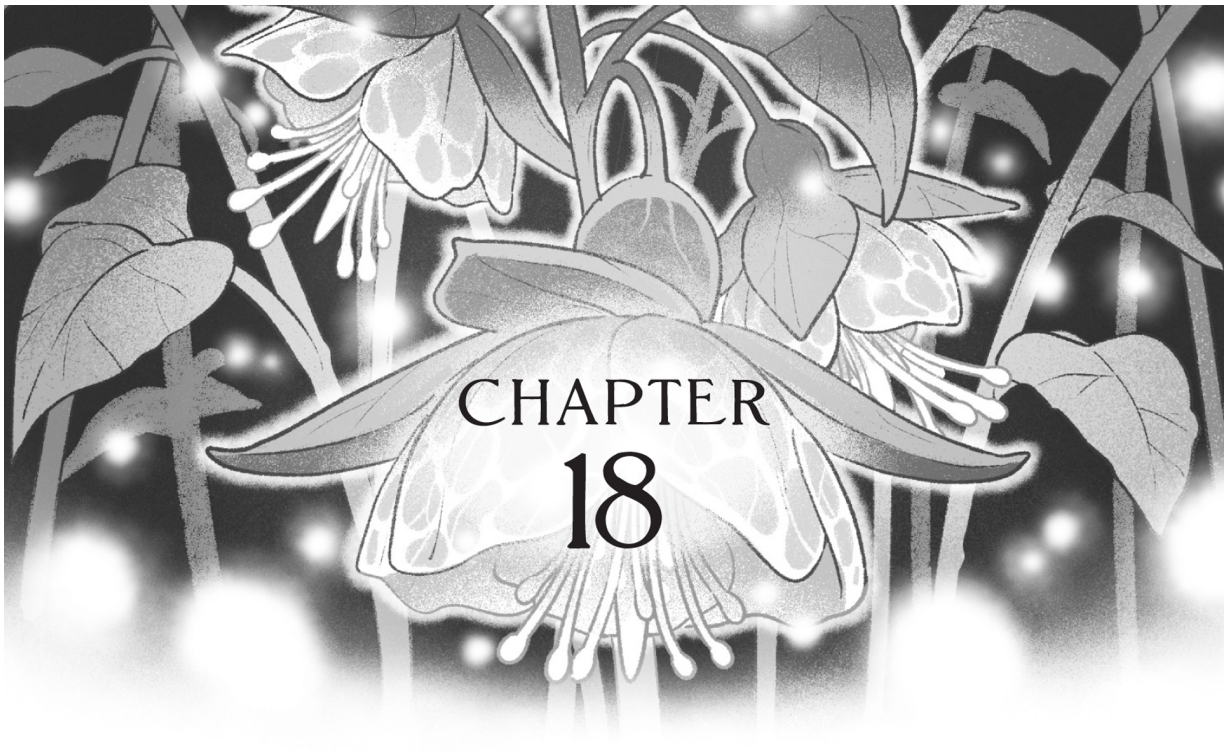
“Do you feel that?” asked Hetty. “What’s happening?”

A thin swirl of shadow seeped in through the boathouse door. And then a dark gray leopard stalked through the doorway on silent paws.

“No,” whispered Mikko, exhausted.

Even Cherry sagged, defeated.

Rella lifted her feline head and flashed her teeth. “Happy New Year, friends.”



Hello again, Councilor Yurn," said Rella, slinking down the deck toward him in her leopard form.

Councilor Yurn eyed her warily. "Rella, I hardly expected to see you here."

"I came to see what you've been up to. You always said you were planning to launch your big project on New Year's Eve. Looks like you made your deadline." She smiled at us. "I also had to come back and see my dear old classmates."

Cherry scowled at her and bared her gillybear teeth.

Rella leapt onto the ship's deck and began pacing along the rail. "I see that you made good use of that Bokati wood I got for you, Yurn." She looked down at the wreckage of the defeated shape-shifting bots. "And I

see that the hoverbots *were* listening to me. You recorded my voice, didn't you? And you used my words to make these bots more powerful."

Councilor Yurn started to look anxious. He surely knew that Rella was a fierce fighter. She was also unpredictable. If she turned against him, it could go very badly.

"Rella, I'm so glad you've come tonight," said Yurn, laughing nervously. "I need your help. You made a few blunders in the past, but I can forgive all that. Help me secure this ship and you will be welcomed back in our labs with open arms."

Her cat eyes narrowed. "And what would you give me if I help you?"

"Anything you want! Name it and it's yours."

"Tell me, Councilor Yurn, why do you really want to take over Lotus Island?" asked Rella. "Is it for the space? Or is it because you want to uncover the source of the Guardians' power and take it for yourself?"

Councilor Yurn's face was unreadable. He didn't answer her question, but he didn't deny it either.

Rella tilted her head at him. "And if I help you, will you share that power with me?"

"Rella, you sneaking skunk!" shouted Cherry.

"Yes," said Councilor Yurn to Rella. "The power of the Guardians is vast, and it can be used in ways no one even realizes. If you help me secure this ship, I will capture Lotus Island. And I will share all the power I gather with you. You have my word."

Hetty was in tears. "Oh, Rella, how could you?"

Rella smiled slyly at Councilor Yurn. "Give me just a moment to gloat over my victory, Councilor."

Rella approached me. Her voice was quiet as a cat's purr. "Are you making a New Year's wish, Plum?"

I stomped my hooves in place, fighting to hold back angry tears. I was not going to let her see me cry.

"Want to hear mine?" Rella whispered.

What? How could she talk about wishes right now?

“I wish I could go back in time,” she went on. “I wish I had listened to Master Sunback and never used the chants. I wish I could do everything differently. But I can’t,” she said sadly. “Those are wishes that will never come true.”

I blinked, unsure I was hearing her right.

Rella stared at me. “I messed up, Plum. I threw away my chance to stay on Lotus Island and now I’ll never see it again. I know I shouldn’t care what happens to it. But I do.”

She took slow steps closer to me. “You know what Councilor Yurn will do if he takes control of Lotus Island. He’ll ruin it. He’ll ruin everything. We can’t let him have this ship. Hetty told me about your special power. Will you help me?”

Rella stood so close to me now that I could see every silvery hair on her face. I knew she was asking me to trust her. Did I?

I nodded. We reached out for each other and shut our eyes.

The moment her paw touched my hoof, I felt a *zing*. It was stronger than what I had felt with the others, like an electric jolt, from the base of my antlers down the length of my spine. Rella’s eyes popped open. She stepped back.

She looked up at me and I knew that I had given her more power than she had ever felt before. What would she do with it?

Rella began whispering the strange words of the temple chants. Even though I had only spoken them one time before, every syllable was familiar.

The shadows on the deck of the ship began to gather and swirl. They collected together into a dark mass. This was thicker than the mist she had created on Bokati Island. The shadows pulsed like they were alive.

Rella hissed and tilted her head at the hoverbots. The shadow mass oozed toward them, wrapping itself around them until they disappeared into the dark.

“What are you doing?” yelped Councilor Yurn.

With a flick of her whiskers, Rella sent the shadows flowing toward Yurn. They wove themselves around him, covering him like a cloak.

We heard his muffled cries from inside the shadows, but we couldn’t see him at all.

Rella turned to me. “Hurry! Take the ship and get away from here!”

The rest of us had to shake ourselves out of the shock of what we had just seen. But then we sprang into action.

Cherry ran to me. “Plum, I’ve got to get us free. If you are ever going to make me big as a house, do it now!”

She put her paw on my flank, and I made her grow, and grow, big and bigger. She didn’t let go of me until she was twice her usual size.

The ship tilted as she bounded across the deck. She reached over the side and yanked up the anchor chain until she had pulled the heavy anchor on board. Then she dove headfirst into the water.

Some of the hoverbots managed to break free of Rella's swirling shadows. Mikko swatted them away one after the other until Rella could wrap her shadows around them again.

"We have to get out of here!" said Hetty.

"Come on, help me figure out how to get the sails up," said Sam, running for the mast.

The ship began to move away from the shadow-filled dock. Cherry was swimming behind the ship, pushing it through the water with her webbed paws.

Rella turned to me again. "Get as far away from here as you can. I'll stay and hold off the hoverbots and Yurn."

"But what about you?" I asked.

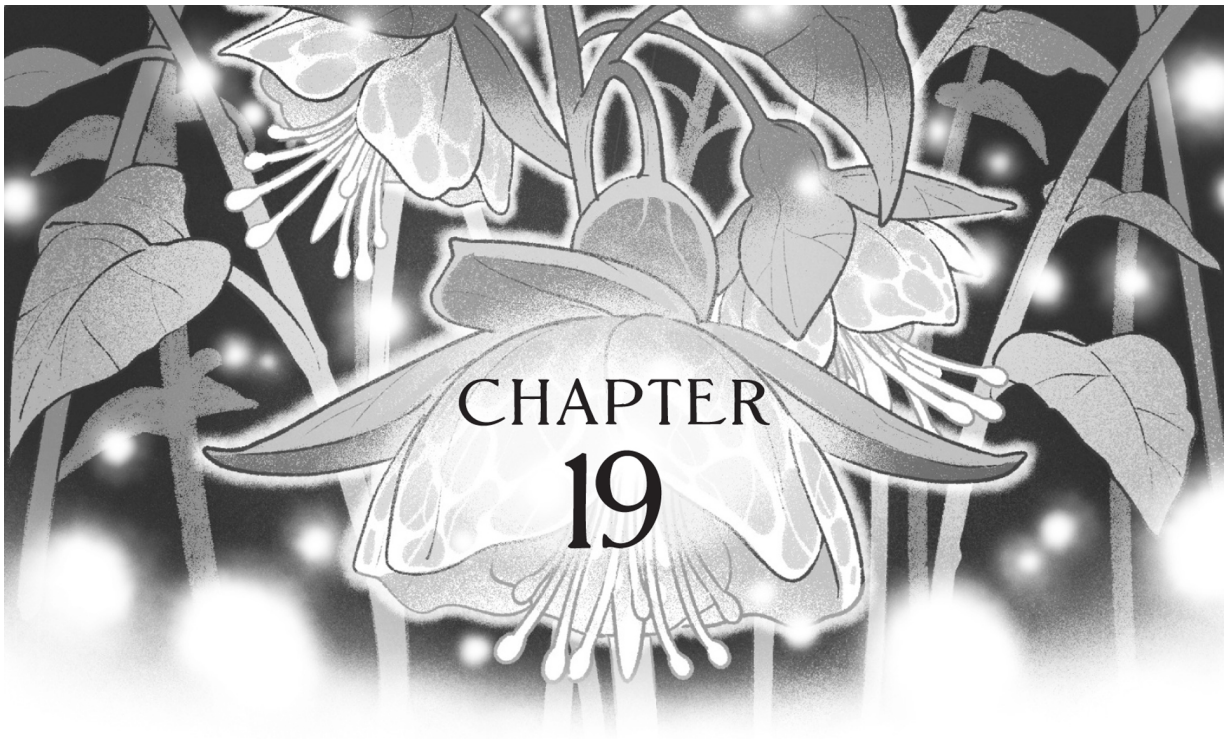
"I'll be all right," she said. "I can take care of myself."

"You'll be in so much trouble. They'll come after you!"

"I can disappear into the shadows, remember? They'll never find me in a million years. You need to go now, Plum. But maybe we'll see each other again."

"I think we will," I said. "For some reason, we can't seem to stay away."

She grinned. And before I could say another word, she jumped off the ship. She landed lightly on the dock. The shadows grew thicker until Rella and the entire dock were swallowed up in darkness.



Cherry swam, pushing the ship through the open boathouse door. As soon as we were outside, Sam unfurled the sails. They caught the wind and snapped open. The ship cut quickly through the water.

Cherry climbed back up onto the deck and shook her fur dry.

We all transformed into our human forms so that we could help Mikko and Sam with the sails. We had no idea how they were supposed to work, but luckily the winds were in our favor. They pushed us along the shore, toward the northern tip of the island.

Suddenly flashing lights and sirens rang out. Behind us, we could make out the outlines of speedboats. The bright beams of searchlights scanned the water.

"Great," said Hetty. "It looks like the whole city is out looking for us!"

"I'm sure my mother has raised the alarm," said Sam. "She's probably worried about us." He turned to me. "Plum, I don't think she knew

anything about Yurn's real plan to take over Lotus Island."

"I don't think she did either," I said.

Sam's face looked so pained. "She's not perfect, but she has a good heart."

I took his hand. "I believe that too. But I don't think we can let her have this ship. I'm scared of what would happen if Councilor Yurn—or anyone else—gets their hands on it."

Sam gazed at the place on the shore where the lights of his house twinkled. "I feel like I should go back. My mother—I can't just leave her."

I squeezed his hand. "It's okay, Sam. I understand."

"I'll draw off the search bots so you can get away," he said. "And I'll tell my mother everything so that she'll know the truth about Yurn. Where will you go?"

"I want to take this ship as far away from Yurn as possible," I said. "And then we have to get back to Lotus Island. We have to warn Master Sunback and all the Guardians about this."

"I'll find you," said Sam. "On Lotus Island, or wherever you are. We'll find each other."

I smiled as big as possible so that I wouldn't start crying.

We hugged tightly. The others quickly said goodbye, and then Sam transformed into the wolfhund and dove into the water. He paddled toward the shore, straight into the beams of the searchlights.

With Sam providing a distraction, our ship rounded the headland and we aimed west. But once we headed into the open ocean, the wind seemed to die out. Our sails sagged uselessly. The ship slowed nearly to a stop. Far behind us, a line of flashing red-and-white lights skimmed the water.

“I think those are hovercraft coming after us,” said Salan, peering into the dark.

“Oh, come on,” said Cherry. “Can’t we catch a break tonight?”

“Our sails are so big,” I said. “Surely we can go faster than those hovercraft!”

Mikko tugged on one rope and another. “I don’t know how to sail, Plum. And the wind changed. It’s actually pushing us back the way we came.”

Hetty pointed into the water ahead of us. “And we’re about to hit that big rock! Watch out!”

Salan ran to the rail and looked down. “That’s not a rock. It’s Plum’s friend. Wow, I can’t believe it. He actually floats!”

I rushed to the railing. Down below, Master Render bobbed on the dark surface, rolling slowly along. He really did look like a big boulder sticking up out of the water.

“Master Render!” I called to him. “What are you doing here?”

“It is the New Year,” he called back cheerfully. “I am leaving. I am off to look for my friends. I will take the Old Road.”

And now Master Em’s vision for me—the vision that had once seemed so impossible—flashed before me once again:

I see you traveling an ancient road. You are following in the path of the Great Beast.

Hetty paced the deck behind me. “The hovercraft are getting closer!”

I leaned over the ship’s rail. “Master Render, where is the Old Road?”

“Very close,” he said. “I can taste it in the water. It tastes like rainstorms.”

“Can you show us how to get there?” I called down to him.

“Of course,” said Master Render. “When we get to the Old Road, that big boat of yours will go very fast. We can relax. We can ride.”

“Plum, what are you talking to him about?” asked Salan.

“Master Render knows about an ocean current named the Old Road,” I explained. “If we can find it, it would carry this ship away from Nakhon Island. We could get away from those hovercraft without needing the sails. And I don’t think anyone else knows about it. Master Render said that he used the current to come here from the Old Home.”

“The Old Home!” cried Cherry. “Plum, we can’t ride some ocean current to the other side of the world!”

Mikko smacked his palm onto his forehead. “This night just gets worse and worse.”

“Hovercraft are gaining …” warned Hetty. “Their lights are getting closer.”

We had to get away. But Cherry was right. “Master Render?” I called to him. “We can’t go to the Old Home with you. It’s too far.”

“You do not have to travel the Old Road the whole way,” said Master Render. “There is an island not too far from here. You can stop there and hide. Be safe.”

I explained what he said to the others.

“A random island?” said Mikko. “Are we seriously doing this?”

“They are getting *really* close now!” said Hetty.

“What choice do we have?” said Cherry.

We all knew she was right.

“We’ll go with you, Master Render,” I called down to him. “Once we get to that island, we can decide what to do.”

“What about Master Sunback?” said Mikko. “And Master Dew and Brother Chalad, and the other Novices? We have to tell them what happened. They could still be in danger.”

“I can do it,” said Salan. “I could fly straight there and tell them.”

Hetty gasped. “It’s too far!”

Salan looked up at the clouds moving swiftly overhead. “The wind is moving east now. As long as it holds, I can make it there in one night—especially with a little help from Plum.”

We all agreed that he should go. We hugged him tightly.

And then Salan transformed into the wybird. I changed into my roan form and focused on increasing his powers of flight as much as I could. When I was done, he leapt up and beat his wings. The wind picked up and carried him high, high to the east. We watched him until he was out of sight.

Cherry transformed into the gillybear and dove into the water. She paddled behind the ship, pushing it along as Master Render led the way. When we hit the Old Road, we felt it instantly. The current was so swift. It felt like someone was yanking us forward with an invisible rope.

We helped Cherry climb back on board. She and I both transformed back into our human forms.

The searchlights of the hovercraft faded behind us. Soon, the lights of Nakhon Island would be too far to see. The moon had risen, so at least it wasn't completely dark. We had managed to escape, but there was no denying it: We were very alone in the middle of a very big ocean.

"I don't like this," said Hetty. "Our group is all split up now."

"Ugh, and we don't even have any food!" moaned Cherry.

I felt in my dress pocket. I pulled out the small yamyam that Lady Ubon had given me and handed it to Cherry.

She took a bite. Her eyes grew wide. "Oh, *wow*. Here, try."

She handed it to Hetty. She took a bite, then Mikko, and then it was my turn.

I bit into the crunchy skin and the sweet, tangy juice hit my tongue. I smiled. "Just like sunshine."

We leaned against the ship's front rail. The breeze blew the hair back off our faces.

Suddenly Mikko pointed down at me. "What's that?"

Hetty and Cherry stepped back and stared at me. "Plum, your dress!"

Tiny dots of light flickered on and off within the folds of the fabric. There were just a few at first, and then the whole dress glowed with pulsating light.

Cherry shook her head. "Madam Darning, that wild genius."

"I guess this means it's time to tell each other Happy New Year," I said.

"Do you think we still have time to make our wishes?" asked Hetty.

"If we do, then I wish for the wind to be at Salan's back," said Mikko.

"I wish for calm seas," said Hetty.

Cherry pinched her eyes tight and clasped her hands in front of her. "I wish that when we go down below, we discover that Councilor Yurn stocked this ship to the brim with primo snacks."

I put my arm around her and gazed out at the horizon. The moon shone bright above us.

"I wish for us all to be together again," I whispered. "On Lotus Island."

LEGENDS OF LOTUS ISLAND

TEMPLE OF SECRETS

Read on for a special sneak peek of
Plum's next adventure!

I lived almost my whole life on a tiny island surrounded by water. But I never understood how vast the ocean really was until I was on a ship, at night, in the middle of the sea.

I stood at the front railing in my roan form. My antlers glowed with a bright ruby-red light. I swung my head side to side, sweeping the light over the dark waves below.

"Hey, it's not your turn to keep watch yet," said a voice behind me.

I turned to where Mikko stood holding the ship's wheel. "I know, but I couldn't sleep." I transformed back into my human form. "Do you want me to take over at the wheel and give you a break?"

"Nah, I couldn't sleep either. Besides, look up. Once you turn off that red spotlight of yours, you can see so many stars. I bet there are a million in the sky right now."

"That's because we're about a million miles away from civilization and anyone who could help us." We turned to see Hetty crossing the deck toward us.

Hetty was always a worrier, but this time she was right. It was a little shocking to think about all we had been through in the last twenty-four hours.

We had narrowly escaped being attacked by the hoverbots of Nakhon Island. And we had stolen this massive wooden ship to prevent the greedy Councilor Yurn from using it to launch an attack on Lotus Island. We desperately needed to get back there, to warn Master Sunback and all the others that they could still be in danger.

Worst of all, we were separated from our friends. Salan had flown back to Lotus Island in his wybird form, and we had no idea if he had made it or not. Sam had stayed behind in Nakhon Island out of loyalty to his mother, the powerful Lady Ubon.

And Rella? I still didn't know if I could call her a "friend." But without her, we never would have escaped. The last we saw of her, she was using her shadow powers to hold back Councilor Yurn and the hoverbots so that we could get away.

I sighed and squeezed the shell pendant that hung around my neck. If I ever needed a sign that things were going to be okay, it was now.

The silence was shattered by a loud *crunch, chomp, chomp.*

I turned around. Cherry held a box out to me. "These ship chips aren't half bad. You want one?"

"Those are *emergency* biscuits," Hetty scolded. "Besides, they don't taste like anything except salt."

Cherry smacked her lips and pondered. "Salty nothing isn't a bad flavor."

I had to smile. Leave it to Cherry to focus on snacks in the middle of a crisis.

I leaned over the front rail of the ship and looked down into the water below. The moonlight glinted off Master Render as he rolled through the waves, swimming along beside us.

I leaned farther over the railing. "Master Render, you told me that there would be an island along the way where we could stop and rest. And

hopefully stock up on some real food. Are we getting close?”

He plunged his face back into the water again, then came back up. “Very close. I taste fallen coconut branches.”

Mikko pointed ahead. “Hey, I think I see something …”

A large, dark shape emerged on the western horizon. An island.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christina Soontornvat is the bestselling author of three Newbery Honor books, *A Wish in the Dark, The Last Mapmaker,* and *All Thirteen: The Incredible Cave Rescue of the Thai Boys' Soccer Team.* She is also the author of Scholastic's beloved fantasy series Diary of an Ice Princess, the graphic novel *The Tryout*, as well as the picture book *To Change a Planet*. As a child, Christina spent most of her time at her parents' Thai restaurant with her nose stuck in a book. These days, she loves nothing better than spending a day hiking and swimming in the creeks and swimming holes around Austin, Texas, with her husband and two daughters. You can learn more about her work at soontornvat.com.

LEGENDS OF LOTUS ISLAND

ON AN ISLAND LIKE NO OTHER, AN INCREDIBLE ADVENTURE BEGINS!

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